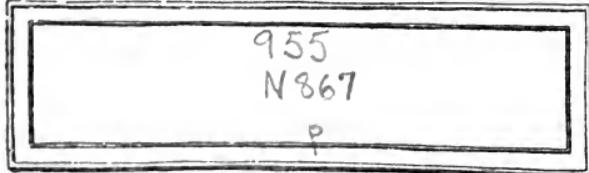
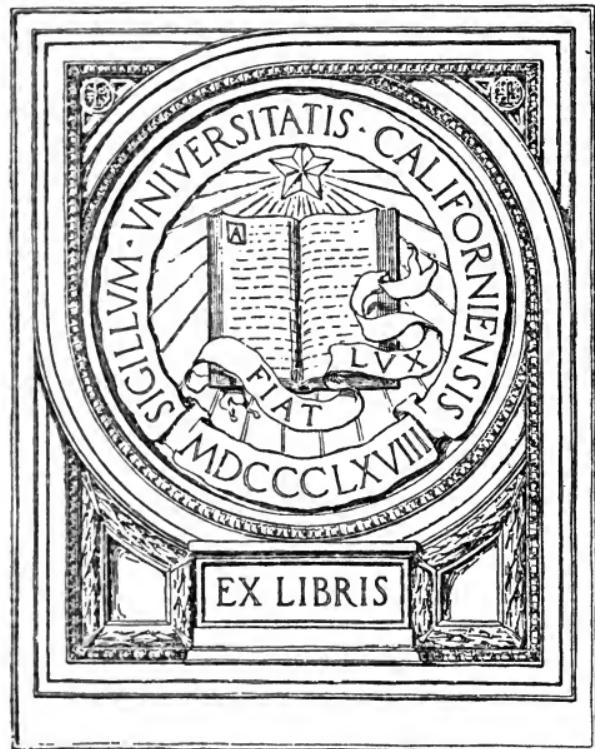


GIFT OF
Mrs. John B. Casserly







PROUD PETER



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BY

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AUTHOR OF "NO NEW THING," ETC.

SECOND EDITION



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Gift of
Mrs. John B. Cassidy

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PROUD PETER



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CHAPTER I

THE BEGINNING OF ME

IT does not seem quite fair that baptismal names should be bestowed for life upon helpless infants to whom they may prove altogether inapplicable. That a certain traditional significance does attach to nomenclature will not be denied, and who knows how many people have been vexed, embarrassed and even led astray through their earthly careers by more or less conscious endeavours to behave like Algernons when they ought to have been Johns or to conduct themselves as Augustas should, in spite of their being such unmistakable Susans ? I don't know that I ever so much as attempted to act up to my name of Peter (Peter, I take it, is a good-natured, rough-and-tumble, jocular sort of mortal), for the futility of any effort in that direction must have been manifest to me from the very first ; but the fact that I have been condemned to make my humble way in the world under a label so misleading has often worried me and caused me to feel myself something of a sham.

Why this initial burden was laid upon me by the kindest of parents I am unable to say, since Peter is not amongst our family names ; but I incline to suspect that my father thought he was conferring a distinction upon me by calling me after one to whom he was fond of alluding as the Chief of the Apostles. The high-church Anglican that he was should not, one might have supposed, have deemed St. Peter's title to that designation paramount, and indeed it has always appeared to me that the Christian religion, as at present formulated, owes a good deal more to Paul of Tarsus than to Simon the son of Jonas ; but my father, I believe, was very nearly a Roman at heart, whatever he may have been by profession. At a time when doctrines and practices which are now accepted with tolerant indifference were regarded by a large proportion of the British people as heinously subversive he was a pillar of strength to the Tractarian laity, a staunch backer of persecuted, prosecuted parsons and a courteous confuter of bewildered bishops. I have been told that in the militant Protestant circles of those days Vaux of Chivenham was bracketed with Manning and Newman amongst arch-traitors, but held to be more dangerous and treacherous than they, by reason of his obstinate adherence to the communion in which he had been born.

But I was going to say that if anything could have been more grotesquely inappropriate than my Christian name, it would have been the adjective

which was permanently prefixed to it ere I had yet ceased to run about bare-legged. Perverse, puzzle-headed or preposterous I might, for alliteration's sake, have been dubbed without too glaring a departure from truth and charity ; but proud—never, if I know the meaning of the word ! Certain persons, it is true, have been found to assert that I don't ; certain persons are less intimately acquainted with me than I am with myself. As I look back upon my half-century of existence, marked out into chapters by successive humiliations, I doubt whether any human being has ever had less cause or excuse for pride, and I am certain that none can have had a scantier experience of the sensation. Yet ironical Fate decreed that I should be known to my family by a ridiculous misnomer, and it seems like the very climax of irony that its originator should have been my elder sister Cicely, of whom it may confidently be affirmed that she has done no willing or witting injury to man, woman or child during the whole of her earthly pilgrimage. “Proud Peter,” she called me, in reproof of I quite forget what display of infantine insubordination ; then the others caught the *sobriquet* up, and it has stuck—Heaven alone knows why ! All I have to say in connection with it is that if I have throughout recognised the impossibility of making myself a plausible Peter, I have been doubly and trebly convinced that under no circumstances could I develop into a proud one.

In my happy childhood, however, I did not much mind what Arthur, Bob and the rest might be pleased to call me. I did perhaps rather mind their mimicry of my slight stammer, though I took care not to say so, having always had a great shrinking from letting people know when I am hurt. But indeed I was not often hurt—not more often than was good for me, anyhow—in the course of my first halcyon decade, nor can I imagine a more joyous and contented brood than that with which Ralph Vaux of Chivenham Court and Catherine his wife were blessed. For that blessing doubtless they had themselves chiefly to thank; it is not out of ingratitude to their beloved memory that I ascribe our felicity in some measure to environment. I shall always think that it is an immense and abiding advantage to have been brought up in the country, and I daresay nobody will grudge me the fond fancy that my own west country is the pick of all England. Divers concomitants of early childhood, such as the fragrance of freshly-cut grass, "the moist, rich smell of the rotting leaves," the laugh of green woodpeckers in spring or the plaintive call of the brown owls on misty November evenings, have for us rustics a poignancy which city-nurtured folks can never know. They may, I suppose, say that fogs, smoke, the shriek of railway whistles and the reek of greasy mud fulfil a similar function for them. I will concede, if they like, that it may be so; but I

really must not be asked to admit that there exists anywhere, in town or country, an abode more delectable than the spacious, rambling house, partly Tudor, partly Jacobean, mostly Georgian, in which I was born. I could not conscientiously do it. Chivenham Court is not a grand place nor, from the architectural point of view, a specially beautiful one ; but I think most people would allow that the park and the wooded hills which surround it have beauty of a quiet order, and I am bold to affirm that the extensive, old-fashioned gardens are beautiful very nearly all the year round, our climate and our sheltered situation on the borders of West Devon and Cornwall being propitious to many varieties of sub-tropical shrubs. But why, after all, should one give reasons for cherishing a sentiment so universal as love of home ? Very likely if my old home were as unattractive as it is charming I should love it none the less.

It was in the park that old Giles, the head groom, gave me and my younger brother Bob our first lessons in the art of equitation. He insisted upon making us ride our somewhat spirited and mischievous little Dartmoor ponies barebacked, and of course many a fall was the result. It was not always the easiest matter in the world to catch the ponies after they had got rid of us ; but Giles said that was all in the day's work. He also alleged that tumbling off and getting "knocked about a bit" was just what we needed.

"Larn 'ee balance, Master Peter," he would remark, with a grin, if I showed any disposition to laugh on the wrong side of my mouth. "You won't take no harm, my dear ; you'm too young and too small for a toss or two to break the bones of 'ee."

I rather wonder that we did not break our bones, and I am by no means convinced that old Giles's system was a sound one ; still, he certainly did teach us to ride. What he likewise did, and what I would not for the world have admitted at the time that he had done, was to spoil my nerve. As a boy I was not strong, nor have I ever had more than just courage enough to face what has had to be faced ; so I secretly dreaded those rough experiences, which gave Bob nothing but delight, and my mother—who did not need to be told how any of us felt, because she always knew—was for having me excused. But of course I could not consent to that. In after life circumstances obliged me to be in the saddle all day and every day for long stretches of time, and I have had some queer mounts, first and last. However, I do not consider myself at all a good horseman.

Bob, though my junior by a year, was my equal in height and weight, while his superiority to me in every form of athletic exercise, which naturally became more marked as we both grew older, was apparent even then. In the matter of proficiency at games (and in all other matters too, let me hasten to add), Bob was destined to reflect credit upon the

family ; but Arthur was and remained our champion exhibit. I need not, at this wrinkled and grey-headed stage, hesitate to say that we Vauxes were renowned for our good looks : even I, the admitted and proclaimed failure in that respect, might have been quite passable in my boyhood and youth if I had not had the ill luck to knock my prominent nose askew while attempting to butt Bob in the stomach and encountering the sharp corner of a bookcase through his agility. But Arthur made us all look commonplace. Never have I beheld his physical equal. He had the beauty of an Apollo or an Adonis without any of the effeminacy which attaches to those classic examples of human comeliness ; in him Nature seemed to have resolved upon turning out, for once, a really perfect piece of work. For, not content with bestowing upon him faultless features, wavy brown hair and dark blue eyes, shaded by singularly long lashes, she had capped these gifts by an admirably proportioned frame and a muscular development which from childhood rendered running, jumping, swimming and rowing the most facile of acquirements to him. When I add that he had an irresistibly winning disposition, the heavy handicap placed upon him by too bounteous Fortune will perhaps be realised. What indeed could any impartial person expect to befall a poor frail mortal so richly endowed that the love of women and the admiration of men were bound to be his portion ? An impartial person would doubtless

have opined that nothing could save Arthur from going to the deuce and that nobody ought to blame him if he did. But of course we of his own family were not impartial to that gloomy extent. One and all, we frankly worshipped him, and if it had depended upon us to spoil him, spoilt, I presume, he would have been. Luckily, the usual educational process stepped in and made what it could of our *rara avis*. It had made of him, when I was a small boy, a typical Etonian of the better sort—a little condescending to us youngsters, as was only natural, but good-humoured, generous, unaffected, and, I do believe, largely unconscious of his immense personal advantages. It is true that he was not particularly clever nor at all industrious ; but why should he have been either ? No great talent, no great industry are required for the evolution of a cavalry officer and an ultimate squire. As for me, I was always metaphorically on my knees before him.

“ Now then, Pup-pup-Peter,” he would say, imitating the impediment in my speech, as he often did, “ let’s see how long it will take you to shin up to my room and fetch me a blazer that you’ll find there.”

And off I would bolt like a hare, only too glad to be despatched on any errand with which it might please His Magnificence to honour me.

I was less accommodating with my other brothers and sisters, except with Cicely, who figures in my remembrance from the earliest days as a kind of

second mother to us all and whose beautiful unselfishness was rewarded as unselfishness for the most part is. Whether or not it is a sufficient recompense to be loved by those who make unsparing use of you and take your going to the wall for granted in moments of stress I cannot tell, having little experience of my own to guide me to a decision ; yet I daresay she thought so and thinks so. With Bob I had numerous quarrels and fights ; but Bob was ever ready to make friends after one or other of us (I fear I was generally the one) had been knocked out of time. Tom, my junior by six years, I felt entitled to kick as soon as he reached a kickable age. I make him no apology ; he required kicking rather badly, whatever may be his present views upon the point. Of course Daisy, who was a year younger than Bob, could not be kicked, though I am far from saying that some verbal equivalent of that process would have done her any harm. I remember to have tried to perform my duty by her in the way of occasional snubs, but I do not remember to have achieved satisfying results. Daisy, pretty, pert and nimble-witted even in her nursery days, was not born to be snubbed by the slow likes of me. I am not sure that in my secret soul I was not almost as much afraid of Daisy then as I am to-day. Alas ! in vain does one's hair turn grey ; vain are wrinkles and philosophy and such measure of wisdom as the years cannot but bring. As one is born so one must live and die. The only difference is that one no

longer minds what one used to mind. I should not, for instance, in the least mind being called "abnormally sensitive" now by anybody who took interest enough in me to call me anything, whereas I was made acutely miserable in my half-fledged period by overhearing that estimate of me fall from my mother's lips. I did not know then, as I do now, that sensitiveness is a malady, like gout or bronchitis; I thought I was being charged with a mixture of conceit and timidity, and I smarted under the imputation because it struck me as so unjust—or maybe for the opposite reason.

My mother, for that matter, was not a likely person to judge any of us amiss, while we, on our side, were too devoted to her to dream of judging her at all. Only through long lapse of time and by a rather difficult effort at detachment can I form a picture of her as she then probably was—a shrewd, quietly humorous woman, small, thin and bright-eyed, whose influence was far greater than appeared upon the surface and who knew more of the world and its inhabitants than she cared to proclaim. She came of a talented stock and, being herself extremely capable and well-read, might, I daresay, have played a more or less prominent social part, had she been so minded; but my father's increasing family and diminishing rent-roll had caused him to sell his London house, and if she had any regrets, I am quite sure that she never gave utterance to them. But most likely she regretted nothing and was well

content to be the best of wives and mothers. Moreover, although she was to reach old age or the confines of it, her health was not robust ; so perhaps, after all, Chivenham was the best place for her.

It was she who on a memorable day—well she knew how memorable I should ever hold it !—broke to me the news that Bob and I were to be sent to a preparatory school. She did not pretend to like the prospect or to think that I should like it. She said :

“ Peter dear, it’s horrid and it makes one want to cry ; only there’s no use in crying.”

With all the more warmth because, as a matter of fact, the tears were not very far from my eyes, I protested that I certainly wasn’t going to do that.

“ Oh, *you*, no ; of course not ! ” she returned, laughing ; “ I was speaking for my feeble self. These things have to come ; but the worst of them is that they mean the end of a chapter. You’re going to turn over a fresh page in which everything will be new and strange and perhaps a little appalling here and there ; it’s the first of a number of fresh pages and in some ways I think it’s the most formidable. Your father will have a talk with you and will say what ought to be said better than I can. But, Peter, you’ll remember—won’t you ?—that though you must change, I shall not. I shall always be just the same old mummy, and when you want me you’ll always find me in the same old place. Promise to

tell me of all your trials and difficulties, big or small."

She had her arm round my shoulder, to which she kept giving gentle little squeezes while she spoke ; her bright, wistful eyes were full of love and compassion. Too full of compassion, perhaps, to please me, who have never been able to endure pity, despite my frequent, inconsequent yearning for it. I gruffly gave the requested promise, not realising—how should I ?—that it could not possibly be kept. I suppose she must have known that it could not and that her wish was merely to make me understand how sure I might feel of her sympathy at all times. In a sense I did understand ; I don't think I ever really doubted thereafter that her sympathy would be mine for the asking. Only my shy, ungracious nature has rendered asking repugnant to me all my life long.

A boy of shy, ungracious nature stands but a poor chance of happiness amongst some three score small congeners. The private school to which my brother and I were despatched was considered an excellent one ; Bob speaks of it with reminiscent affection to this day, and I believe that, when questioned by my parents, I was in the habit of stating laconically that I was "all right" there. But the true truth is that I hated it with my whole soul. Of all human creatures boys between ten and fourteen are, I take it, the most implacably, if unconsciously, cruel. I was not popular with my fellow urchins, nor perhaps

did I deserve to be, and unpopularity, which in later life connotes as a rule nothing worse than neglect, is sure to take active forms amongst those who have not yet learnt the necessity of toleration in a composite world. The world of a private school is as little composite, as rigidly uniform as its denizens can make it. *Sois mon frère ou je te tue!* is apt to be the motto of the callow Briton, whose friendship is readily accorded to his duplicates, but who cannot detect any difference between idiosyncrasy and “beastly swagger.” If I was not bullied, it was because Arthur had instructed Bob and me in the rudiments of pugilism and because I had a long reach ; but there are methods of torture which inflict more pain than blows.

One or two friends I did make. We used to confide to one another our deep loathing of the entire scheme of existence to which we were bound, with its unvarying monotony, its gregariousness, its petty restrictions. Football, I remember, we accepted and might even have liked if it had not been compulsory ; but cricket, at which we were not proficient, was anathema to us, and I am still of opinion that if you are neither a bowler nor a decent bat, cricket is about the dullest game in which you can engage. Little boys, we are told, must be made to play games, whether they will or no, and I agree that loafing will not do ; yet it seems a pity to give them a distaste for what they ought to enjoy and to affront that love of liberty which is implanted in

every human breast. Only a short time ago I was reminding Bob of those remote days and wondering why they should have been made as bitter as they often were to so inoffensive a person as myself ; but he did not appear to share my wonder.

“ Well, you know, old Peter,” said he, laughing, “ the fact is you were always so devilish proud ! ”

Give a dog a bad name and hang him ! Sir Robert Vaux, Justice in the King’s Bench division, has never, I am persuaded, sentenced any man to be hanged upon insufficient evidence ; but he has not a great deal of imagination, and it would be just like him to argue that nicknames are not given for nothing. He would be ready, I suspect, to ascribe every one of my long list of failures to the quality or defect—call it which you will—wherein I have been most conspicuously lacking.

CHAPTER II

I CHOOSE MY CAREER

YOUNG birds harden quickly after they take their flight from the nest. No change which can befall a man in later life is so great, or anything like so great, as that which he must envisage when he is first tossed forth, alone in a crowd, to find his legs and his level as best he may. The experiences and impressions of small boys would be interesting and pathetic enough to listen to if they ever gave utterance to them ; but that, of course, is the last thing that they would dream of doing. One's earliest lesson at school—a salutary lesson in the main—is to hold one's tongue, and now that I am an old man, with licence for garrulity, I do not find myself much more disposed to make a clean breast of my own crude impressions than I was of yore ; although I have not forgotten them. Crude they were ; yet I can't call them wholly erroneous. The miniature world to which one is introduced at school really does bear a close resemblance to the larger world, if neither is quite so bad a place as I used to fancy. Places are in a great measure what we make them ; only if you

want to make a pleasant place of school or the world, it is well to be provided with a thick skin. Mine happening to be a thin one, the process of initiation could not but be rough for me. It would have been rougher still if my hand and eye had not been trained to work together and if I had not been backed by the somewhat humiliating championship of a younger brother who was liked by everybody.

However, there were the holidays to look forward to, to look back upon and blissfully to enjoy during their too-brief span. Almost it was worth while to be a schoolboy for the sake of the holidays. I think perhaps I liked the summer holidays best, because of the intense joy which I derived from wandering far and wide at my own will, space and solitude having, for some reason or other, always made powerful appeal to me; but Christmas, too, was a jolly season. At Christmas we were taken out to watch the shooters, which was a delight to me, and soon, after having undergone a careful course of preparation, we ourselves were entrusted with guns. I am very fond of shooting. It is the only thing that I have ever done, and can still do—I must not say well, because the standard has become so high, but at least respectably, and when I brought down my first cock pheasant (Bob only managed to knock the tail feathers out of his) I was for once in truth a proud little mortal. I think my father was also a little proud of me and pleased with me; though he said nothing. He himself had, I believe, been a fair

shot, but had abandoned the sport on account of his dislike to depriving beautiful wild creatures of life. He made no virtue of this, admitting that rats, snakes, wasps and flies, which one destroys without a moment's compunction, have as good a right to exist as pheasants, partridges or hares ; only he personally did not like killing the latter, and, since it gave him no pleasure to do so, he preferred accompanying Uncle Charles and the rest of us with a harmless walking-stick in his hand.

Uncle Charles, at that time a gay Guardsman of, I suppose, thirty or thereabouts, did not fail to visit us at least once during the shooting season, notwithstanding the superior sport which he might have obtained elsewhere ; and I think we all felt that this was very nice of him. Very nice and kind he invariably was to us children. Naturally, Arthur was his favourite ; but he was beloved by us all, and many a tip have I received from his ever open hand. He was a tall, fine-looking man, much in request (so we gathered) amongst smart folks and with a vague suggestion of naughtiness about him which probably did not lessen our admiration of his general prowess. What puzzled and disquieted me a little was that Uncle Charles never went to church—not even on Christmas Day—and it seemed strange that this scandalous abstention of his should pass without comment from my father, who assuredly would not have suffered any servant in his employment to neglect what we had been taught to regard as an

absolutely imperative duty. Cautious inquiry elicited from my mother the information that Uncle Charles was an Agnostic, together with the further regretful admission that Agnostics were not Christians, which sounded sufficiently terrible. But she begged me not to talk about it, adding, with a sigh and a laugh, that many a man is better than his principles. Either my father participated in that lenient view or else he took comfort from the "invincible ignorance" theory ; for he was upon terms of mutual affection with his genial, worldly brother, little habituated though he was to condone religious scepticism. I may wrong him, but I cannot help suspecting that to his mind things were likely to prove more tolerable in the last resort for an Agnostic than for a Nonconformist.

At Chivenham, as throughout the west country, Nonconformity was numerously and powerfully represented, and strenuous exertions to render the services of the Established Church more attractive to outsiders were productive of but meagre results until worthy, prosy old Mr. Glanfield, the Rector of the parish, was found dead in his armchair one afternoon. Then at last came my father's opportunity. The living being in his gift, he hastened to offer it to one Mr. Rimmington, a hard-worked South London vicar of advanced tenets, who, after some hesitation, decided to accept a change which his doctor and his undermined health urged upon him. He was, my father exultantly affirmed, the very man

for the place. He undoubtedly proved himself so ; but I imagine that his enthusiasm and his personal magnetism would have made him the man for any place. Processions, incense, rich vestments (provided at my father's expense), *missae cantatae* and other such aids to devotion were efficacious, no doubt, as allurements to the general public—I am free to confess that they have always exercised a fascinating influence upon my own senses—but the one and only thing which is safe to draw and hold congregations all the world over is eloquent preaching. Mr. Rimmington was in some respects the finest and by a long way the most moving speaker to whom I have ever listened. Without notes, without the slightest visible effort and with the potent help of a singularly sympathetic, vibrating voice, the pitch of which he constantly varied, he could talk for an hour in such a manner as to make his hearers believe that he had not claimed their attention for a quarter of that time and to deprive them of all natural anxiety to get home to supper. Had he very much to say ? Possibly not ; for I find that I cannot recall a single sermon of his, only incidental happy phrases and telling metaphors coming back to me. If, as I believe some people asserted, his manner was superior to his matter, that, after all, was to concede him the essential gift of an orator ; but his matter, so far as I can recollect, was practical enough. Generally he had something to ask for—whether in the shape of alms or of certain specified

acts—and always he got it. He could do just what he pleased with his entranced audience, which speedily became too large to be accommodated in the spacious, hitherto three-parts empty parish church. Chivenham, once a quiet village, had already in his time begun to develop into a thriving country town, assisted towards prosperity by the vicinity of china-clay, as well as by tanneries, breweries and other industries which were continually adding to the number of its resident working population ; but the fame of him soon spread beyond our borders, so that on Sunday evenings contingents would arrive from as far off as Plymouth and Devonport, and I have seen the aisles and transepts packed with chairs until there was not standing room left, while the emaciated, white-haired figure in the pulpit dominated that vast concourse, playing upon it as upon a musical instrument and touching by turns every key in the scale of its joint emotions with his long, lean fingers. Their tears and their money flowed readily at his bidding ; sometimes there was such sniffing and blowing of noses that he had to pause for silence ; my own sobs were gulped down with difficulty. “A sacerdotal revivalist,” somebody called him. Yes, I suppose so, and I am not concerned to deny that his sway may have been transient ; but I fancy that he himself would have been the first to make that acknowledgment. He did not, I believe, set a high value upon the gift of oratory ; but, possessing

it, he made the most of it, and his triumphs, if destined by their nature to be short-lived, were at all events swift and for the time being complete. I can answer for the completeness with which one small hearer of his was conquered by him. To me he was an inspired seer, a heaven-sent guide. It was not only that he seemed to read and interpret my inmost thoughts but that he widened my whole outlook upon the world and existence. In truth he narrowed it, the excellent, saintly man ; but that is neither here nor there. My veneration for him knew no bounds ; insomuch that I could not even extol him while we trudged homewards and that it pained me to hear Arthur describe our soul-stirring evensong as a “ripping good show.”

All boys and a large proportion of grown people are imitative. To witness the consummate skill of an expert means for most of us so prompt a longing to emulate his feats, be they what they may, that we half persuade ourselves that we can. I declare that to the present day I cannot look at certain dancers without an envious twitching of the leg muscles, or watch a professional golfer driving from the tee without a pleasing vision of my own stiffened arms performing a similar exploit. Now it is very certain that I shall never dance again nor ever be honoured with a handicap of less than two figures at golf ; but of course at a time when my years had not long arrived at the dignity of two figures no future success could be dismissed as unattainable, while

that of some day holding an audience of fellow-creatures spellbound did not even look discouragingly difficult. The ease with which it could be done was so visible ! Thus there came an evening when my mother was told that she need not worry any more about my destiny, because I had firmly and finally made up my mind to take Holy Orders. Dear mother knew me too well to hurt me by smiling, and although I presume that she must also have known very well how to account for my solemn announcement, she forbore to question me. All she said was :

“ Well, one never knows. I remember once thinking that I should love to be an actress. Fortunately, the question of your future may be allowed to lie upon the shelf for a good long time yet.”

This lukewarm reception of a piece of news which I had meant to be both momentous and agreeable was not at all to my liking. I protested that my intention was no mere childish caprice, that I had “ thought a lot about it ” before coming to a decision and that I wished she wouldn’t mind letting father know of it. Why we were all a little afraid of my father I can hardly say, for although not what is generally called an indulgent parent, he was anything but an austere one. He did, indeed, expect obedience and obtained it, but not by severe methods, nor could he be said to hold aloof from us, despite a normally preoccupied attitude which sometimes had the effect of making us feel small in his presence. It may have been his habit of fixing his great grey eyes upon ours when we

spoke to him that daunted us, or more probably an impression that he was of a character too undeviatingly upright for sympathy with ordinary human frailties. When I strive to summon back across the mists of intervening years his spare figure, his grave, handsome face and the close-cut, greyish beard which he had a trick of gripping in his left hand, the old sensation of uneasy inferiority creeps over me. I am sure I was fond of him, I am sure I respected him ; only I was never really comfortable with him. Possibly I might have felt more so if his self-control had been less absolute. A man who never under any circumstances loses his temper is, it must be confessed, somewhat terrible. Upon no solitary occasion can I call to mind having seen my father lose his ; yet I can recall many occasions on which his temper must have been highly tried. So, notwithstanding my anxiety that he should be informed of what I had resolved to become, I preferred to make the communication vicariously, and it was not without tremors that I awaited his verdict. He said what doubtless nine fathers out of ten would have said and what was in truth the only thing that could be said.

“ You are much too young, Peter, to bind yourself down to a calling for which you may find that you have no inclination ten years hence. The life of a priest, as I understand it, requires special dispositions which it would be useless even to discuss now. If you will be advised by me, you will put the

subject away from your thoughts for the present and attend to the things that belong to your age. Of course if you had set your heart upon the Navy, that would have been another matter, because then there would have been no time to lose ; but the Church, the Army, the Bar and the Civil Service are not in such a desperate hurry for you. They can afford to wait, and so can you.”

All the same he was glad, and he could not quite conceal his gladness. I partly understood at the time what was to grow clearer to me later, that the prospect of having a clerical son who might in years to come succeed to the benefice of Chivenham must of necessity make appeal to him. That his conscience would not allow him to give me overt encouragement did not prevent his hopes from chiming in with mine, nor was he likely to despise early signs of a possible vocation. Meanwhile, he had offered me sound advice which I should have been wise to follow ; but I was so full of myself that I must needs impart my purpose to Bob, who responded by a whistle of incredulous amazement.

“A parson !” he ejaculated. “Good Lord ! fancy wanting to be a parson ! Peter, you *are* a rum chap !”

I don’t know that Bob had any special prejudice against the clergy as a body ; but probably parsons were associated in his mind with schoolmasters, and a small boy whose ambition it was to become a schoolmaster would indeed have been rather a rum

chap. Upon reflection, Bob opined that I must be “a bit off my nut,” and I daresay that explanation commended itself to him with increased force when I compared him (how well I remember it and his round, dismayed, compassionate face !) to Festus. He might have retorted by congratulating me upon the modest inference ; but he did not. He limited himself to sighing heavily, digging his hands into his pockets and marching off, with the air of one who declines further vain parley.

Need I add that I was treated with scant mercy by the remaining members of the family ? For all our unfailing observance of our religious duties (as soon could we have omitted to wash our faces and hands as to disregard them !) we had a short way with individual assumptions of righteousness, and although nobody could have been more humbly convinced of sin than I was during that enthusiastic phase, the need for taking me down a peg or two may well have appeared urgent.

“ Dearly beloved bub-bub-brethren,” called out Arthur, hauling me into the schoolroom by the collar of my jacket, “ I have the honour and pl-pl- pleasure of presenting to you the Reverend Peter Vaux of this parish. If any of you know cause or just impediment—”

“ Impediment ! ” interrupted Daisy, with a shriek of laughter, “ I should rather think there was one ! Peter, stand up and say ‘ Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled pepper,’ or you’ll be plup-plup-plucked.”

I said it quite easily. As a matter of fact, my intermittent stammer had never prevented me from reading aloud or reciting as well as anybody else ; it was only in conversation and in moments of excitement that my tongue was apt to decline its office. But of course compliance with the prescribed test did not suffice, nor could Cicely—ever ready to succour the distressed—protect me from an unending fire of witticisms which left me stolid and unshaken. I hope I was not a little prig ; honestly I don't think that I was. I did not assume the airs of a martyr and did not fancy myself one ; yet the situation was such as to drive me inevitably back upon myself and to give me at least some outward semblance of priggishness. If I had had sense enough to act as my father had recommended and had kept my own counsel, I should have escaped many an hour of unrevealed misery and very likely my life might in certain respects have taken a different turn ; but somehow or other gratuitous blunders seem to have been rather characteristic of me from first to last, and as the close of life draws near, I have to own that the few who have loved me in this world would have been altogether excusable if they had lost patience with me. The wonder and the consolation is that they never did.

CHAPTER III

ADOLESCENCE

Nobody, save the infinitesimal minority who commit suicide (and they for the most part are reckoned as temporarily bereft of reason) wants to die ; yet very few people, I suppose, are so enamoured of existence that they would like to live their lives over again. No second helping for me, thank you ! Yet if I might select a patch out of the dead past for resuscitation—well, I don't know what I might not be foolish enough to choose, but I know that, if I were wise, I should pronounce without a moment's demur in favour of my Eton years. Never shall I forget the glad surprise of my first introduction to that generous republic, so unalterable in its traditions, so liberal in recognising the right possessed by each of its juvenile members to be himself. Traditions, of course, there were, to which one was expected to conform ; but from the outset I was made to realise that the liberty of which I had not enjoyed one hour at that wretched private school was mine, that I might strike out my own line, and that if I wanted to be a crank I could be one without consequences.

more unpleasant than those to which cranks expose themselves all the world over. Many as are the claims of Eton upon my love and gratitude, the one which stands out pre-eminently for me is the atmosphere of kindly toleration with which the place was instinct. When I compare notes with former schoolfellows I do not, I am bound to say, find that they were impressed in equal measure by this feature ; but that may be because they stood in less need of it than I.

No doubt I began well through being provided with a *major* of such high renown as Arthur. Some reflection of his waning glory probably illuminated my pale dawn ; still, to set against that, there was the speedy and inevitable discovery of my incapacity to follow in his footsteps ; so if it gave me a sort of a start, it only served to exhibit me in the sequel with all the greater emphasis as in every sense of that word *minor*. Arthur, when he left—which was not long after Bob and I joined him at my tutor's—was Captain of the Boats, was in both Field and Wall Elevens, had carried off the steeplechase, the mile, the sculling and I forget how many additional honours without difficulty and without perceptible elation. Modest does not sound quite the right adjective for him ; but I can hit upon no more apposite one to describe his entire freedom from swagger. He accepted success, I imagine, as a matter of course and might have been more astonished than mortified if by chance he had failed

to secure it. His popularity with great and small was immense ; for his natural charm of manner conquered all hearts. He cannot have thought much of me personally ; yet he refrained from commenting upon my general inefficiency and showed me such kindness as it was possible for a personage of his sublimity to evince towards one of my insignificance. Bob proved a more worthy successor to him. Bob, who was a born cricketer and who was in after years to shed lustre upon the eleven, took at once to the "dry" section designated by his name, while I, being a born duffer, gravitated naturally, and I think sensibly, to the river. Even a duffer can get plenty of enjoyment out of a boat ; but in what the fun of fielding out at cricket consists I have never been able to understand.

Happy and uneventful were my Eton years—happy by reason of their uneventfulness ; for the memorable incidents which stand up like milestones upon the trodden road behind me were seldom, if ever, of a nature to make for happiness. I grew up quietly and contentedly in an environment which suited me and amongst a small knot of friends who, like myself, were at ease in obscurity. I developed after a time into a fairly good sculler and did ultimately just manage to get into Lower Boats ; but that represents the sum of my outdoor achievements. My tutor was pleased with me because I had a turn for Latin verse and because I was not given to kicking up a row in the house. Of the

remainder of our microcosm I may say that they barely knew I was there, accepting me, when their fugitive attention was drawn to my person, as an inoffensive, slightly eccentric being, destined for the Church and on that account excusable for sometimes going up to St. George's Chapel at Windsor after four, instead of playing football or fives. My destiny was known to and acquiesced in by all and sundry, including my parents. I did not quarrel with it, if I was no longer quite as zealous about it as at first. I was, I suppose, religiously minded to the extent of deeply venerating the form of religion in which I had been brought up, with its symbolic rites and observances ; I remember periodical fits of devotion ; I still dreamt of one day fascinating multitudes by pulpit eloquence and saw no reason why I should not discharge the more humdrum daily duties of a country clergyman as well as another. Besides, I had said that I was going to be a parson, which ridiculous little circumstance may have contributed more than anything else to keeping me up to the mark.

It was not poor Mr. Rimmington's fault that the halo with which my fancy had invested him on dim Sunday evenings and within hallowed precincts faded gradually under the garish light of common day. Hero-worship is an ennobling thing for the worshippers, but it is liable to bear hardly upon the heroes when they are seen at close quarters. In the pulpit Mr. Rimmington was an irresistibly persuasive

saint ; out of it he was a sad, nervous, taciturn old man, who suffered from constant headaches, was at times a trifle peevish and could brook no hint at opposition. Despite his success—by which he set little store—in gathering together troops of hearers, he was, I believe, disappointed with Chivenham, regarding his work there as relatively barren and his parishioners as hopelessly inert. He would say of them that they had very nearly all the vices of South London slum-dwellers without the latter's redeeming and endearing traits. The soft climate of West Devon causes limbs and brains to move deliberately ; whereas his walk was usually a trot and his intelligence was for ever darting about like a firefly : no wonder our rustics tried the patience of which, to tell the truth, he had no superfluity. Nevertheless, the people were fond of him, and did things for him which they would not have done for anybody else. It was impossible to help being fond of him ; only, as I say, I was constrained to deprive him of his halo, and that was probably a more serious deprivation to me than to him.

“ Why should you wish to take up a justly despised calling ? ” he surprised me by asking one day. “ The Church has ceased to be a power in this country, and everybody knows it. We parsons are a feeble, time-serving folk, acquiescing in all manner of evils which we ought to denounce, disunited, without *prestige* and without authority. We aren’t worth attacking, we aren’t even worth disestablishing,

we are just negligible. What can we do beyond tickling the ears of the idle, visiting the sick and distributing the alms of the laity ? You would be better advised to be a politician or a stock-broker."

My father, who probably did not construe such petulant outbursts literally, used to listen to them with a quiet smile. He himself would have been glad enough, perhaps, to live under ecclesiastical rule and had little sympathy with the modern spirit ; but he was no pessimist. For good or for ill, he said, we had done with mediævalism ; also we had done with Puritanism, eighteenth-century infidelity and other intervening phases. He hoped and believed that what he called the Catholic Revival was destined to bring fresh life to the Church, citing in support of that hope the greatly increased activity of Church workers in our corner of England which had arisen during his lifetime and which he himself had done so much to stimulate. By the time that I had shot up into a lanky youth he and I had been drawn somewhat more closely together. Intimate I cannot say that we were, for I doubt whether he was ever really intimate with anybody except my mother ; yet he showed a certain preference for my company which flattered me. Of the pleasure that my holding to my resolution gave him he no longer made any secret, as indeed there was no longer any reason why he should. Nothing could be more natural than that he should be glad to have a son so unexceptionably disposed ; nothing

could be better fitted to bring him comfort at a time when his firstborn was beginning to threaten him with the reverse.

Anybody who knew Arthur might have foreseen that he would run up bills at Oxford. He was in receipt of a liberal allowance ; but if it had been doubled he would have got into debt with equal certainty and an equally light heart. It was in his nature to make money fly, just as it was a part of his nature to bestow it right and left. He likewise took to backing horses, which is seldom found to be a lucrative game even by those who ought to understand it. Information as to the details of his embarrassments did not reach the rest of us ; only we knew that they must be rather serious when my father left hurriedly for Oxford to see him and when, during the ensuing Long Vacation, he emerged from a protracted interview with the head of the family looking half amused, half bewildered and decidedly chapfallen. A clear vision of him comes back to me as he entered the schoolroom, which had remained our special territory, cast himself down into a rocking-chair, flung his arms wide and let out his breath in a huge sigh of exhaustion.

"Have you been admonished ?" asked Cicely, a little apprehensively.

"Admonished, my dear girl," he replied, "is the word. Scolded, no ; he doesn't scold. I could have stood scolding, because, between ourselves, I

deserve it ; but such a talking to as I've had was pretty expensive at the thousand odd pounds which it cost me. Or perhaps I ought to say that that was what it cost him ; but my poor head is buzzing so that I can't tell t'other from which. Peter, my son, don't you ever let yourself in for this kind of thing ; you may believe me when I tell you that it's no treat."

What appeared to have been represented to Arthur with some sternness was that he could not continue in his extravagant courses without despoiling other people, and that already, as one consequence of them, a projected season in London for Daisy's *début* had perforce been abandoned. Additional economies would have to be effected in directions which must entail loss upon the unoffending, and he had been invited to consider dispassionately how much moral difference there was in this regard between him and a common thief.

We all exclaimed in chorus against so harsh a way of putting things, even Daisy, whose pretty face had lengthened at the threatened loss of her London season, joining in our protest, of which Arthur made suitable acknowledgment.

"I wish," he sighed, "the governor would work himself up into a rage and swear freely, after the manner of governors ! But to sit staring fixedly at you and mildly saying things that make you wish you had never been born is not quite playing the game.

And how the dickens was I to guess that he was hard up ? Has he ever told any of you that he was ? ”

He had certainly never intimated anything of the kind to me. Although I was aware that we were not immensely rich, I had always supposed that we were very well off ; and so (as I afterwards gathered) perhaps we might have been, had his contributions towards the restoration and adornment of churches been regulated on a less princely scale. I must, however, in fairness add that Arthur’s memory had played him false in the matter and that, when reminded of it by Cicely, he owned to having on a previous occasion received warnings that the family resources were running low. Likewise to having made promises which he had been prevented by adverse circumstances from fulfilling.

“ Dear things,” he concluded, addressing us collectively, “ I’m sure you know that if I’ve robbed you I’m most frightfully sorry. It shall not occur again.”

“ Until next time,” observed Cicely in an undertone.

But we did not associate ourselves with that distrustful murmur. What though there should be a next time ? One and all, we were on Arthur’s side—prepared to pardon future peccadilloes in advance, secretly proud of him, I daresay, with his open-handedness and his fine disdain of parsimony.

He was gazetted to the 22nd Hussars shortly

before I went up to Oxford, and in the latter part of that same year, 1882, Uncle Charles came to visit us, decked with Egyptian laurels. Uncle Charles, then recently promoted to the command of his battalion, which he had led with honour and distinction at Tel-el-Kebir, appeared to have enjoyed the campaign hugely and was none the worse for a bullet wound which had happily left his bones intact. I wondered whether he had not been afraid of being killed ; because it seemed to me that, with his convictions or lack of any, he ought to have been. So one afternoon, when he and I had gone out together for an hour or two of desultory hedgerow shooting, I made bold to ask him the question.

“ Well, of course one isn’t anxious to be killed,” was his reply ; “ but one hardly expects to be, and there are other things to think about. Anyhow, we’ve all got to die some day, you know.”

“ And then ? ” I suggested.

He laughed. “ Oh, I see ! I forgot I was talking to the future Archbishop of Canterbury. No, Peter, I can’t say that I have the fear of hell before my eyes, and annihilation is no more terrible than sleep.”

It might have presented itself as very terrible to me in those days if I had deemed it conceivable ; but I did not, nor did I believe that anybody else could. Surely the immortality of the soul was conceded even by those who were unable to accept revealed

religion ! Not, however, it appeared, by Uncle Charles, to whom I addressed some such apostrophe.

" It looks as though we became extinct as soon as our hearts stop beating," said he ; " there's no sort of evidence that we don't. Something of what we call ourselves may survive ; nobody can tell. It's all sheer conjecture."

And then, pressed by a species of half-frightened curiosity on my part to state what he really believed, he avowed, with a smile, that he had no creed at all.

" I have a conscience," he added, " if it will make you any happier to hear that. What it is and where it comes from I haven't an idea, nor have you, my boy ; but it serves to keep me from disgracing the family. Religions—all of them—answer the same purpose in inducing the human brute to behave himself with some degree of decency."

" Only you don't think our own religion is the truth ? " I asked.

" I don't see how its dogmas can be. Still, they are not more absurd than the dogmas of other religions, and though I don't feel the need of dogmas myself, I acknowledge that they meet a general demand."

In me orthodoxy might have found a fairly well-coached defender ; but I was scarcely better equipped for upholding the bases of my faith—as to the authenticity of which I had never harboured the shadow of a misgiving—than I should have been to maintain in the face of contradiction that the

earth revolves round the sun. One is not at the pains of verifying established facts ; one is satisfied with the assurance that they can be verified, if necessary. But, according to my uncle, the alleged facts upon which Christianity rests could not possibly be verified and were upon the face of them incredible. They were, in short, obvious legends and had but an indirect bearing upon conduct, which was the one and only thing that mattered.

"I'm not trying to shake your convictions, my dear fellow ; I think you had much better keep them. I, as an outsider, merely say what you say of all the other creeds. Excellent in so far as they inculcate morality, but untrue in so far as they claim divine inspiration."

He merely said, in fact, what a great many people say and a great many more think ; but, as nobody had ever said anything of that kind to me before, I was disproportionately impressed. Imbued with the idea that infidelity connoted misery, I was thrown off my balance by the spectacle of this serene, gallant soldier, approaching middle age, who enjoyed life, lived as respectably as his neighbours (Uncle Charles's crop of wild oats was understood to have been sown and reaped) and who could anticipate his end without alarm. I learned from him, in the course of a conversation which was interrupted and resumed at intervals, that he had not given up reading the Bible, parts of which he found admirable.

"I like the conclusion of Ecclesiastes," he told me. "'Fear God and keep His commandments; for this is the whole duty of man.' There you are!—that's quite enough for me. I don't know—nobody does—what is meant by God; but I know very well what duty is, and it's a duty to be honest, don't you think so? Heaps of much wiser and more learned men than I accept the Gospel legend as an account of events which actually occurred. So much the better for them perhaps; but it would be a lot the worse for me if I pretended to bow to their authority when I don't and can't. Let's at least be honest."

I can see my cheery, rosy-faced uncle now, tramping over the fallen leaves under a low autumn sky, in light marching order, with his conscience, his honesty and his sense of duty. Of course I agreed that, whatever else may be requisite, honesty is indispensable, and I did not question his. The disturbing thing was that he had caused me to feel some nascent doubts about my own.

CHAPTER IV

PRIEST AND SCEPTIC

BY my father's decree, which was doubtless judicious, Bob and I were not sent to the same college at Oxford. I was clearly bound to be a reading man, whereas he was just as clearly marked out to get his cricket blue ; and in due course we fulfilled our respective destinies, aided, it may be, by our respective surroundings. Naturally, however, we did not see much of one another during the developing process. I cannot flatter myself that Bob regretted this privation as much as I did, for he certainly was not lonely, as I was. Every now and then he used to look in upon me, slap me on the back and exhort me to wake up. Probably I wore a semi-somnolent aspect to his healthy young eyes ; but in reality I was awaking to divers discoveries, some of which interfered a good deal with my physical slumbers. I read hard ; I studied theology, orthodox and other—largely other—with results inimical to peace. If, as Bob affirmed, with a compassionate sigh, I was “born to be a parson,” I was rapidly falling out of conceit with my birthright and would gladly have bartered

it for a less onerous and exacting lot if I had not been withheld by shame. Let me add, however, lest I should do myself an injustice which I can ill afford, that the above ignoble deterrent was not the only one that weighed with me. I had been trained to believe, and did still believe, that doubt in matters of faith was a sin, a snare of the Evil One which must be resisted ; so it was open to me to argue that I had no business to surrender. What justification I found for my eager perusal of Strauss, Renan and other subversive writers I do not recollect. I may have told myself that I sought their acquaintance in the hope of being able to refute their errors.

In any case, my researches had the effect of poisoning Oxford for me, and my memories of that externally attractive city are not gay. The college to which I belonged was a dullish one ; the men with whom I associated were nearly all of them preparing, like myself, for ordination ; they also were dullish, or I thought them so, and not one of them was, to my knowledge, troubled in the same way as I. It is true that I took very good care not to inquire, feeling assured that if anything was likely to prove more disastrous to me than bottling up my misgivings, it would be the revelation of them. In like manner I held my peace when at home. Mr. Rimmington, whose preaching continued to uplift and entrance me, was not the man to deal gently with religious incredulity, and my father, upon whom cares of his own were perceptibly

beginning to tell, would, I feared, be so shocked and grieved if I were to make him the confidant of mine that I kept them to myself. I think I have already mentioned that courage is not my strong point.

One person, indeed, required no enlightenment. My mother's intuitions were never at fault where her children were concerned, and it was as easy for her to see that something was amiss with me as to divine what it was. Nevertheless, she would not broach the subject, but waited for me to speak. Very likely she divined also why I ignored her mute invitation. Words once spoken can neither be recalled nor forgotten, and I had by no means as yet arrived at the undesired goal whither I was steadily tending. Whither the whole family was at that time tending poor mother knew only too well. She told me so—I don't think she told any of the others—with the whimsical resignation which was characteristic of her.

"One isn't sure whether to deplore your dear father's having no head for figures or to be thankful for it," she said. "Perhaps I ought to be glad that he leaves the accounts to me; for if he didn't, this house would be in the agents' hands to-morrow and we should all be packed off to Dresden to economise next week. With his horror of debt, we should get short shrift."

His horror of debt was equalled only by his strange incapacity for keeping out of it. In a vague, general way he was aware of being short of money;

yet he could not be persuaded to curtail his innumerable bounties nor would he consent to sell a part of his unentailed land, which he considered himself morally bound to pass on to his successor. Sometimes, as in the case of that first forfeited London season of Daisy's, he would issue a trenchant edict ; but then he was unfortunately prone to regard the money saved as so much in hand and to bestow it with a clear conscience upon those whom he had been forced to stint. Thus Daisy had been accorded two subsequent expensive seasons, and the only consolation was that she had not thrown her opportunities away. Daisy at the time of which I am writing had just become engaged to Lord Donnington and was about to soar up to those high places which she has never since ceased to adorn. My father's wish was to see all his sons and daughters fairly started in life, and there my mother was with him ; but our several starts might have been compromised if he had known how his affairs really stood. Hence reticences and beguilements for which I trust that one of the most unselfish of women may not be too harshly condemned.

" But I'm wondering," she ruefully confessed, " how much longer we can hold out. Arthur has inherited a noble disdain for cheeseparing which sometimes makes me despair of his ever inheriting much else, and now Bob's Oxford bills come tumbling in, and Daisy's *trousseau* staggers the imagination, and presently, I suppose, we shall

have Tom proclaiming his needs in a loud tone of voice. It's only you and Cicely—bless you both! —who have never caused anxiety and I'm sure never will."

She should not have been too sure of that, poor dear! True I was not likely to give pecuniary trouble, my propensities not taking that direction; but there was at least a possibility of my inflicting keen distress upon my father, and I was disposed, rightly or wrongly, to interpret her communicativeness as a species of appeal. The moment, anyhow, did not seem propitious for avowals.

Uncle Charles would doubtless have been surprised and concerned had he been told that he was primarily answerable for the unsettlement of my mind. He certainly had not wished or intended to unsettle my mind; he had no reason to think that it was unsettled, and for a long time our infrequent meetings occurred and passed without any allusion to topics which an urbane free-thinker does not obtrude upon a budding cleric. He obtruded his views upon nobody, and I am sorry to say that it was I who was the inadvertent means of bringing him into direct conflict with Mr. Rimmington, a *gaucherie* of which I ought to have known a great deal better than to be guilty. The occasion was an after-dinner discussion between my father and the Rector upon the subject of the Lourdes miracles, to which the latter was more than half disposed to give credence. We were far too ready, he said, to

pronounce those who boldly prayed for miracles superstitious, forgetting that we ourselves were continually asking to have the course of Nature interfered with for our benefit. Was it not rather arrogant to assume that the thousands who in earnest faith and humility made the pilgrimage to Lourdes were dupes or impostors ? "Every alleged cure, I understand, has been subjected to searching investigation and supported by independent medical testimony."

I looked across the table at my uncle to see whether he was smiling, but he was not. With his head thrown back, he was emitting successive rings of cigarette smoke—a trick with which he often diverted himself and others—and he wore such an aspect of impartial detachment that I can't think why I was silly enough to ask :

"What do you make of the medical testimony, Uncle Charles ? "

"Eh ?" he responded, desisting from his occupation. "Oh, I agree with Mr. Rimmington—I quite agree. One can't possibly set the thing down as a mere vulgar fraud ; if it were that, it would have been exploded long ago. For my own part, I am perfectly ready to believe that the people who say they have been cured of divers diseases by going to Lourdes are speaking the truth."

Mr. Rimmington did not appear to be grateful for this support. He wheeled round sharply and said :

"But you attribute their recovery to natural causes, I presume."

"It depends," answered my uncle, "upon the meaning that you give to the word natural. Perhaps everything is natural. I'm neither a doctor nor a theologian myself, so I don't venture to say where what we call natural processes end and what we have agreed to call supernatural begin. I should think that if a man whose optic nerve had been destroyed were to recover his sight it would be supernatural; but I may be wrong. It seems to me, anyhow, that the Lourdes miracles can claim to be a good deal better authenticated than the Scriptural ones."

"That," returned Mr. Rimmington, frowning, "has been said before, Colonel Vaux."

"Has it? Well, I'm sure I don't wonder. It's pretty obvious, you see."

The encounter which followed was as unavoidable as a fight between two dogs of whom one is bristling up in anticipation, while the other cannot, consistently with self-respect, drop ears and tail. Mr. Rimmington did not like Uncle Charles, though he was but slightly acquainted with him. He had told me once that he considered him a dangerous man and had hinted that he might be a specific danger to me. Probably he welcomed this opportunity of coming to grips with the foe.

"You imply, then," said he, "that you have little or no belief in what I, as a priest, must hold to be

the revealed word of God. I wonder whether you can tell me by what right you call it in question."

Uncle Charles, thus challenged, could do no less than state his position, which he did moderately enough.

"I should have thought," he answered, "that it was rather for a religion to prove its truth than for anybody to prove its untruth. If you ask me to prove that yours is untrue, of course I can't. Nor can I prove that Mohammed was not the Prophet of God ; I can only say that I don't believe he was. Where you have me at a disadvantage is that if I am to speak sincerely about things which are sacred to you, I shall seem to be offensive. However, I'll try to be respectful. As a fact, I do respect religious men of all denominations."

There is no need to report Uncle Charles at full length, since his reasons for rejecting Christianity were of the kind familiar to all who have thought or read ever so little upon the subject. He urged the difficulty of accepting as conclusive evidence four narratives which might not even be the work of the writers whose names they bore and three of which could not be supposed by any reasonable being to be independent compositions. He said that for him the difficulty was increased, not diminished, by the theory of inspiration, because we should then be obliged to hold that the discrepancies of the Synoptics in some places were as much inspired as their extraordinary verbal agreement in others—a view

hard to reconcile with eternal wisdom and foresight. He quoted Papias, Irenæus and Eusebius, admitting that he did so at second hand and disclaiming all pretension to scholarship. He had merely tried, as far as an unlettered man could, to inform himself with regard to the authenticity of the four Gospels and had found that their claim to be historical documents would not bear scrutiny.

Mr. Rimmington, who had not concealed his impatience, here broke in with :

“ Of course the Gospels are not historical documents in the sense that Cæsar’s Commentaries or the Annals of Tacitus are historical documents. If they were, there would be no need for faith nor any room left for doubt, except in the case of those who, like you, would probably denounce the Apostles as false witnesses. I do not say that the truth of our religion is incapable of strong support even on historical lines ; what I do say is that those are not the methods ordained for us. If I believe, it is not because my reason is persuaded, but because something far above human reason constrains me.”

Uncle Charles nodded. “ The Holy Catholic Church, you mean ? ”

“ That was not quite what I meant ; though the authority of the Church is all-sufficient.”

“ Well, but you Protestants haven’t always considered it so, have you ? How about the Reformation ? ”

Mr. Rimmington, who perhaps did not much

relish being addressed as a Protestant, answered rather tartly that the Reformation was neither here nor there. Errors of practice there had always been within the Church ; always, too, there had been disputes, differences and divisions. However deplorable these might be, they did not touch the common foundation. Naturally, he did not admit that the Anglican branch of the Church was one whit less Catholic than the Roman, and he had a good deal to say about that ; but probably Uncle Charles was less concerned with such questions than with that primary one of an all-sufficient authority, for after some time he remarked :

“ So we come back to a Church which professes to be divinely inspired and says, ‘ Believe this creed or perish.’ The Church answers for the truth of the creed, but who answers for the Church ? ”

“ *Quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus*—” began Mr. Rimmington.

“ Oh yes, I know,” interrupted Uncle Charles, “ and *Securus judicat orbis terrarum*. But I thought that those tags, which appear to have given comfort to a number of people, referred to doctrines, not to the alleged Divine authority of the Church. I must confess that they leave me exactly where they found me. What do they imply, except homage to tradition ? And tradition may be false—as indeed you proclaim that it is in the case of Buddhism or Brahminism.”

It was at this point that something made me turn

my head towards my father, who had not uttered a word. He was sitting with his elbow on the table, his hand grasping his beard, and I saw at once that he was gazing fixedly, not at the disputants, but at me. Very likely he knew the sort of things that they would be saying to one another and was not much interested in listening to them ; but he was interested—gravely, disconcertingly interested—in me, and it came upon me, with a horrid shiver, that he had been watching me the whole time. What if he had ? Well, only that in that case he must have seen that my sympathies were more with the assailant than with the defender of the faith. I felt my face turning scarlet, as though I had been caught in some ignoble action, and the fact that his betrayed no emotion whatsoever only deepened my confusion. Thus I missed what, for anything that I know, may have been a powerful rejoinder on Mr. Rimmington's part. When I had recovered myself to some extent, he was saying :

“ Faith is the gift of God ; to those who seek it humbly and sincerely it will never be refused. You want, or talk as if you wanted, the kind of proof that a jury expect in a Court of Law. You cannot have it ; it is not to be had. Religion speaks to the heart, not to the brain. For nineteen hundred years Christianity has brought consolation and joy to countless human beings, amongst whom have been men of the highest* intellectual power and culture. Do you imagine that such objections as

you have instanced have not been patent to them ? Yet they have not been disturbed. They have *known* in whom they have believed.”

This touched me ; for there it seemed to me that Mr. Rimmington had his feet upon firm ground. There, at all events, was the firmest that I could descry for mine. But Uncle Charles only smiled and shrugged his shoulders slightly.

“ Plenty of great and good and learned men have been heathens,” he observed, “ not to mention those who have been and still are Buddhists and Moslems and Jews. Each religion is bound to call others false. What is the impartial outsider to conclude ? What I do conclude is that you are all a little—no, a great deal—in the right, because you all teach virtue and condemn vice. But when you begin to define the nature of God and when you say that whosoever will be saved must accept doctrines which are contrary to human reason, I have to part company with you. You assert that your sacred books are inspired by the Deity ; but if anyone asks how you know that, the only answer is that they have been pronounced so by some human Council. You start, all of you, with legends and myths ; if you had lived two thousand years ago, you yourself would have been a devout worshipper of the gods of Olympus ; if you are a Christian to-day, it is simply because you happen to have been born in England, instead of in Turkey or Japan.”

For some reason or other, this last assumption

exasperated Mr. Rimmington, who reminded my uncle that he had begun by undertaking to abstain from being personally offensive. He proceeded to take the offensive on his own score by adding :

“ You flatter yourself that you have an open mind ; you pretend to a sort of lofty patronage of everybody who is on the side of good as against evil ; you would like us to think that, in turning your back upon Christianity, you show more fellow-feeling than we for non-Christians who are serving their Creator according to their lights. But is that really so ? May it not be that you shrink from the restrictions which the Church lays upon her children and that, dear as freedom of thought is to you, what is dearer still is liberty to indulge your tastes and appetites ? Ask yourself that question, Colonel Vaux.”

He had assumed his pulpit manner, and it was altogether in his pulpit manner that he now suddenly dropped his voice almost to a whisper and bending towards his neighbour, repeated, with a peculiarly winning smile, “ Ask yourself that—won’t you ?—some time when you are alone.”

Uncle Charles made him a little bow in which there was neither displeasure nor mockery, but which seemed to convey a courteous intimation that the discussion was closed. At the same moment my father pushed back his chair and we all rose. Whilst we were moving towards the door Mr. Rimmington laid his hand upon my shoulder, an

affectionate gesture with which he had never before honoured me. His meaning, I surmised, was that I might count upon him as a protector against insidious endeavours to undermine my faith. I suppose he must have thought that he had floored his antagonist. What I thought (I don't say that I was right in so thinking) was that he had been somewhat impertinent in every sense of the word, painfully theatrical and ill-bred in his final apostrophe. What Uncle Charles thought his good-humoured countenance did not reveal, and I was afraid to glance at my father. Probably the combatants quitted the field satisfied with themselves, if not with one another ; but they left the idiot who had started their passage of arms profoundly dissatisfied with his idiocy in having thus, by a side wind, laid his own soul bare.

CHAPTER V

DAS EWIG WEIBLICHE

UNCLE CHARLES, who had only been with us on a flying visit, departed for Aldershot the next morning, and nothing, so far as I knew, was said by my father about a post-prandial skirmish which had brought no small discomfiture upon a non-combatant. Nothing, at all events, was said to me ; nor, for that matter, would it have been like my father to take the initiative in such a case. What we had said to one another without opening our lips had been in a manner momentous, and I was sure that he had not dismissed it from his mind ; but he doubtless deemed that the choice of developing the theme or leaving it alone ought to rest with me. That was ever his mode of dealing with us. Possibly it is not the very best mode of dealing with the young ; for whom, nevertheless, it has obvious conveniences. I breathed more freely when I perceived that I was not going to be tackled and that I might take my own time over unravelling my tangled skein—if I had one to be unravelled.

During that summer, moreover, there were domestic preoccupations enough to divert attention

from the least conspicuous member of the family. One of these I have mentioned ; other and more agreeable ones were the Oxford and Cambridge match (in which Bob played a memorable second innings), arrangements in connection with Daisy's approaching nuptials and certain hospitalities which had for their object the introduction of her future lord to the county. Donnington was at that time a silent, unassuming young man, with an eyeglass which had a trick of dropping from his rapt eye, like a salute, whenever Daisy came within its range. His subsequent rise to eminence in public life has, I cannot but think, been due more to his wife's aspiring spirit than to his own ; still, as he now passes for an able statesman, it is clear—or should be—that he is no fool. In those days he was so ludicrously in love that he looked, to tell the truth about him, a good deal like one. In Daisy's presence his attitude never swerved from speechless adoration ; when she was absent he did not seem to take much notice of anything. For the rest, well-groomed, ornamental and quite nice to us all.

In his honour, and at Daisy's instigation, we had a series of solemn banquets, followed by a huge garden-party, for which mother sent cards fluttering all over Devon and Cornwall. I don't know whether it was as a result of its hugeness or of Daisy's having made friends with them in London and having pronounced them "awfully jolly people" that the Humberstons were included amongst our

bidden guests. They were really near neighbours of ours ; but, as they were new-comers, we knew very little about them or their putative jollity, for with us new-comers must not look for the open arms extended to wealth by lenient London. When Sir John Humberston, the great contractor, purchased the entire Hallacombe estate from its impoverished owners and paid a long price for it, we all took his being a vulgar old upstart for granted ; an assumption which was not modified by his proceeding to raze Hallacombe Hall to the ground and erect a magnificent modern mansion on its site. Lady Humberston and he had once or twice occupied this edifice since its completion, but only a few of the surrounding residents had been brought into personal contact with them and, so far as we were concerned, a formal exchange of calls had been considered to meet the requirements of the case. Sir John, it was reported, *was* rather vulgar, and, as he had a house in London, another amongst his constituents in the Midlands and a big steam-yacht, he did not sound like a frequent candidate for cultivation by us. Why he had bought Hallacombe nobody knew, except that he was rich enough to buy an estate that he did not want, much as he might have laid out a penny upon a newspaper without taking the trouble to read it. The most interesting circumstance connected with him was that his only child was a daughter, who would presumably inherit his great possessions, and that this fortunate young lady was

a beauty into the bargain. Such, at least, was the assertion of Daisy, who added :

“ Now, Peter, there’s the chance of your life for you ! Don’t be shy, and bear in mind that Chivenham expects every Vaux to do his duty.”

That was the sort of *persiflage* to which I was habituated by my family, no member of which assuredly looked for such an exploit on my part as the conquest of a beautiful heiress. As for telling me not to be shy, I might as well have been told—I often was—not to stutter. Shyness is a constitutional and incurable ailment. Shy I remain to this day ; though I am glad to say that I have long shaken off the distressing hallucination of being the cynosure of all eyes. Why I should ever have suffered from it is a mystery, considering how slight was the notice that I attracted in a crowd ; but in my youth crowds were a terror to me, and on the occasion of that garden-party the insurgent tide of guests caused me to fall back gently but steadily towards a clump of escallonias, behind which I at length took partial cover. It was one of the hottest days of an exceptionally hot summer, cloudless and windless ; so that most people were glad enough to make for one or other of the marquees which had been set up on the lawn. A band from Plymouth was making a rather horrid noise in front of the house ; but during the intervals when the musicians desisted from their labours and mopped their faces, the murmur of bees was audible round about my

sanctuary. The air was heavy with the scent of magnolia blooms. I recall the sight and sound and smell of it all with a strange sense of actuality, because something was upon the point of happening to me which has stamped its whole material framework indelibly upon my memory. I believe I was contemplating a further strategic movement of retreat when a small knot of people—Daisy, Donnington and a few others—came strolling across the grass in my direction. I took little heed of them, and doubtless they would have taken none of me if Daisy had not chanced to look up just as she was at my elbow.

“Oh, Peter,” she exclaimed reprovingly, “what are you doing here all by your lone, when you ought to be charming the company with quip, anecdote and repartee? Miss Humberston, this is my brother Peter, who is simply dying to be introduced to you, little as you might suppose it to look at him.”

It was a cruel way of presenting a timid youth to a self-possessed lady; though I daresay I should have been equally disconcerted by any other form of introductory words. As far as I can recollect, I made an ungainly bow and got rather red in the face. I know I did not say anything. It was Miss Humberston’s low-pitched voice which presently suggested that we might talk with greater comfort out of the full glare of the sun.

“If you would like to be really nice,” she

continued, "you might take me to some shady spot where I could sit on the grass and tie up my shoelace. I can't cast myself down and do it here under the public gaze."

She seemed to think it the most ordinary thing in the world that Daisy and her satellites should have moved on, leaving us to entertain one another. To me it was already an adventure, and I am not sure that I had not, even at that first moment, a premonition that it was to prove a thrilling one. Of course I could do no less than comply with her request, which was a simple enough matter. A minute or two sufficed me to conduct her to a more secluded part of the garden, where she sank gracefully to earth beneath a spreading copper beech, remarking as she did so :

" Ah, this is better ! "

Presumably we had exchanged some observations on the way ; but I am unable to recall them. What comes back to me is my curiously prompt feeling of being at my ease with her ; also that furtive side-glances revealed her as not being so particularly beautiful after all. I soon changed my mind as to that ; although I always recognised the justice of the general lukewarm verdict, which was to the effect that Violet Humberston was " quite pretty for an heiress." She had a great quantity of silky brown hair, rather large grey eyes and an unblemished complexion. That, perhaps, was all that could be said, or was likely to be said, about her

by the average observer. The beauty—or at any rate the charm—of her face consisted in its ever varying aspect and in the smile which brought out a deep dimple on her left cheek. But it is out of the question for me to describe her. Possibly nobody else ever saw her with my eyes, and possibly my eyes saw in her a being who never actually existed. I myself embarked then and there upon a phase of existence which was nothing if not unreal, and the first symptom of the change was my boldly offering to tie her shoe-lace for her—a proposal which in my normal state I never should have dreamt of making. Down upon my knees I dropped, and an exquisite little foot was thrust into my trembling hands. The only difficulty in the way of rendering her the service named was that her shoes had no laces. She laughed when I was fain to point this out to her ; she had a delicious, gurgling laugh which might have warned a modern Ulysses to stop his ears, but which was far from suggesting so distrustful an action to me.

“ Oh, I forgot,” she said. “ Well, let us make believe that you have tied a good, firm knot for me. Thank you so much. The mission of the make-believe shoe-string,” she went on, “ was to get me out of the scrum and give me a chance of talking to you for a little. I hope you don’t mind.”

Mind indeed ! From the dim depths of the distant past I can yet hear myself spluttering out :

“ Wh-wh-what do you take me for ? ”

“ Ah,” she tranquilly returned, “ that’s exactly

what I don't know. It's exactly for the sake of an answer to that question that we're here, you and I. One glance at you was enough to show me that you aren't just pleasantly ordinary, like your cricketing brother ; but if I'm to find out in what your special extraordinariness consists, I must have a little help, please."

The really extraordinary thing was that she got it. Probably it was not so much modesty as dread of ridicule that had always made me hate talking about myself, and I can only explain the positive alacrity with which I proceeded to become quite confidential by saying that Miss Humberston had cast a spell upon me. I could not have refused to do anything that she asked me to do ; also I knew intuitively that she would not laugh at my self-revelations. However, as I cannot feel the same complete confidence in the readers of this narrative, I refrain from recording in detail the dialogue which ensued. I will only say that if before its conclusion her curiosity was not set at rest (and she declared that it was not), her ardour for exhaustive research must in my case have been flatteringly keen. I did not have all the talking to myself ; she gave as well as took, making me acquainted with her tastes and general mental attitude, which appeared in many respects to resemble mine. It was scarcely surprising that the only child of such wealthy parents should set little store by her numerous enviable appurtenances, and indeed, as she truly remarked, you can't make a

superabundance of anything a source of perpetual joy. Satisfactory though it is to have enough to eat and wear and so forth, it is impossible to multiply gladness in the same ratio as articles of food or clothing. If you are unable to swallow more than two buns, what is the use of having twenty? One asks for something besides profusion from life, and the complaint that she had to make of her own life was its desperate monotony. "Everybody is so deplorably like everybody else!"

"I suppose you see a great many people, don't you?" I asked.

"Hosts; and if I were to shut my eyes, I could never tell one of them from another by using my ears. We keep on saying the same things and doing the same things, all of us, year after year, as if we were so many clocks that never needed winding up. I suppose we do end by dying; though it's difficult to believe it."

Certainly it was difficult to associate her with the idea of death. It was not at all difficult to believe that she might be bored; but she negatived that suggestion.

"Oh, I don't think I'm often bored; I was only trying to account for my being so thrusting," she explained. "I hunger and thirst for originality; so that was why I simply couldn't bear to let you slip through my fingers."

"Am I original?" I inquired wonderingly.

"As if you hadn't been telling me so all this time!"

Besides, you advertise your originality to all who have eyes to see. One doesn't have a face like yours for nothing."

There is in my possession a photograph, taken at Oxford somewhere about that period. It represents a tall, lean youth, with a crooked nose, straight hair, a long chin and a somewhat wistful expression of countenance. After subjecting it to careful and dispassionate scrutiny, I am bound to say that if I were to come across a young man like that to-day, I should in all probability look at him twice and should perhaps try to get speech of him. There is something about the mouth and eyes which is—I won't say attractive, but rather unusual. One might, on seeing him, feel an inclination to ask him what was the matter. Had Miss Humberston put such a question to me, I should hardly have told her that the Thirty-nine Articles were the matter; much less should I have returned aloud the answer which would have taken shape within my own breast—that nothing was the matter, now that I had met her. It was as though I had been waiting for her all my life, almost as though I were now for the first time really alive. Whether I realised that I had fallen over head and ears in love with her I am not sure. Like everybody else of my age, I had pretty often been what is called in love, though my shyness had always held me leagues away from an avowal of these evanescent passions; but I could find no parallel for the transformation of my whole

being which Miss Humberston had miraculously effected nor any terminology fitted to describe our mutual relations. She, I presume, was not equally at a loss ; for she seemed to be of opinion that so commonplace a word as friendship would do very well. We were to be great friends, she decreed ; I must promise never to drop her, or she would be inconsolable. When would I go and lunch at Hallacombe ?

“ Just you by yourself, mind. Your sister is as charming as she is pretty and I’m so glad that she and Lord Donnington are coming over to us soon ; but I think you and I will make an assignation for another day, won’t we ? ”

We must have been sitting rather a long time under the copper beech, for most of my mother’s guests had departed when Miss Humberston, preparatory to taking her own leave, gave me the above bewilderingly delightful invitation. Immediately afterwards she introduced me to her parents, who looked as if they had been wondering what had become of her. Sir John, keen-eyed, white-bearded, florid of aspect, shook me by the hand, saying absent-mindedly, “ Oh, how do you do ?—how do you do ? ” Lady Humberston, stout, over-dressed, wreathed in smiles, told me at the top of her voice how much she had enjoyed herself and how she envied us our dear old house. Well, it did not really signify what they were like ; though I was a little sorry to hear my mother

thanking them with gentle cordiality for having come. I knew that when mother assumed that tone it was because she experienced a difficulty in being polite.

My father not being in sight, it devolved upon me to escort the Humberstons to their carriage, a privilege which, as I need not say, I was prompt to seize. My younger sister, looking much tickled, joined us on the way, and it would not have been Daisy if she had neglected so tempting a chance of putting me to confusion.

"*Well, Peter,*" she began, "I must say you're getting on! Disappearing for the whole afternoon with a lady and refusing to look at anybody else when at last you return! I never should have believed it of you. You'll make yourself the talk of the neighbourhood at this rate."

"Don't blame your brother," said Miss Humberston composedly; "it was I who kidnapped him. And I give you fair warning that I haven't done with him yet."

Daisy was evidently puzzled. I suppose she would as soon have suspected a beautiful heiress of flirting with the butler as with me; yet I might easily be fool enough to take that kind of nonsense seriously, which would be a pity. So, with a compassionate glance at me, she said:

"Peter, my poor child, mind what you are about. This is a wu-wu-wicked world and the games that are played in it are no gug-gug-games for you."

One hears a great deal in praise of tact—usually from persons who are entirely devoid of a quality which Violet Humberston now showed that she possessed. Anybody else would have ignored that rather unkind travesty of the impediment in my speech ; but she knew better.

“ I love a slight stammer,” said she, smiling brightly at me ; “ I think it’s the prettiest thing there is.”

She tossed that to me, as it were a parting gift, while climbing into the stately Humberston barouche, and, with a wave of her hand, was borne away from my entranced vision.

CHAPTER VI

ELYSIUM

THERE'S nothing half so sweet in life as love's young dream, and—speaking for myself—I may add that there's nothing half so blissfully insane. When I look back upon that unclouded summer I see how completely my love for dear Vi Humberston deprived me of such wits as I possessed, releasing me by the same stroke from all carking cares and anxieties. Nothing mattered in the least, except that I was with her or going to be with her, and I was with her so continually that my heart's desire was satisfied. I don't think that I ever troubled at all about ultimate consequences ; the present was superlatively good, and the present sufficed me. That, no doubt, is the right way to be happy ; but it seems a little odd that I should have been able to adopt it. It may likewise seem odd that the parents of so lovely and precious a being should have acquiesced in her spending unlimited hours with an ineligible young man ; but that perhaps admits of easier explanation. The Humberstons, notwithstanding their large and distinguished London acquaintance, were far from

having firmly established themselves in the recusant West ; they probably wished to become intimate with us and were not unwilling to welcome even so insignificant a member of the family as myself. My insignificance, moreover, may well have been synonymous in their judgment with harmlessness. It was not because Vi had been pleased to take me up and make much of me that there was any risk of her regarding me in the light of an imaginable husband. Vi was clearly destined for the peerage. Already she might have been a viscountess, had she been so minded, Lady Humberston informed me one day, giving me further to understand that coronets of various degrees only awaited her acceptance.

I was not distressed or made jealous by such statements. How could I dread rivals, coroneted or other, when I had not yet dared to think of myself as an aspirant ? What I joyously knew was that Miss Humberston preferred my company to anybody else's. I knew this for a fact because I had had it from her own lips.

“ You're an inexhaustible mine,” she said to me once ; “ the more one excavates the more one gets out of you, and there never was your like for looking at things from unexpected angles. Yet you aren't a bit conceited.”

I should mention that she considered me very highly educated—as indeed, in a limited sense, I was—and our long, desultory talks strayed sometimes into regions of literature and philosophy. She

herself had not read deeply on any subject, she told me ; there had been so little time ! But she wanted very much to read, or, better still, to assimilate the condensed results of somebody else's reading. Of course she could no more do that than assimilate somebody else's food ; but equally of course I was careful not to say so. My incomplete learning was at her service for what it might be worth, and to me, at all events, it was worth something, inasmuch as it helped to procure for me those intimate meetings which she showed no small ingenuity in arranging. I was for ever at Hallacombe upon one pretext or another, and although the big, pretentious house (built of Portland stone in a hybrid Renaissance style) was always full of people, she would brush them aside, like flies, for the sake of wandering about the grounds with me. I call them to mind only as a shadowy throng of smart persons, whose names I have long ago forgotten, if I ever knew them ; for me the population of the world was at that time restricted to two mortals, of whom I had the supreme felicity to be one.

My infatuation may or may not have been the subject of remark at home. I believe, as a matter of fact, that Bob and Daisy did chaff me a little ; but what with the approaching wedding and one thing and another, my people were probably too busy to bother their heads about me. Not that I should have cared if they had.

I had been playing lawn tennis with Miss

Humberston on a certain afternoon, and we were cooling ourselves in the adjacent tent which she reserved for her own special use, when she announced that she was now and for the future going to call me Peter.

"I've taken a dislike to addressing you as Mr. Vaux or Mister anything," she explained.

I said I had always had a rather particular dislike for my Christian name, but that it would thenceforth be music to my ears. "And may I," I asked, greatly daring, "call you by yours?"

She laughed. "What—Vi? Well, I don't know why you shouldn't. Better not in public, perhaps; but when we are by ourselves—yes, if you like."

It will be perceived that we had travelled some distance in a comparatively brief space of time. Yet I was still a long way from telling her that I loved her—an even longer way from flattering myself that she could ever love me. The very fact of her unconcealed, advertised affection for me was no favourable omen, although I think I was contented with it.

"Peter," said she, that same afternoon, "you've got to take a double first. I insist upon it."

"For pity's sake," I protested in dismay, "don't insist upon such extravagant things! I haven't the wildest chance of a double first."

"Well, then, I abate the double," she rejoined; "but a first you must positively have. Nothing will persuade me that you can't romp in with a

first if you choose. You have it in you to win all manner of distinctions ; but sometimes I'm afraid you won't, because you have so little faith in yourself. It's a grave defect, Peter."

I think it is ; and ridiculous as a man who habitually overestimates himself may appear at times, one has in most cases to hail him as a victor. For my own part, though I could not think that my conviction of mediocrity was a mistaken one, I pleaded guilty to a general lack of assurance which I was powerless to cure.

Vi said decisively that it must be cured, or I should never do any good. " I give you my revered father as an example of the success of cocksureness. All his triumphs in business and politics have been achieved by that. He hasn't *known* much—he'll tell you so himself—but he has always marched straight ahead, looking neither to right nor to left, and above all never looking back. And the consequence is that he ends where you see him."

I could believe it ; for he had the hard, steady eyes of one who is not to be diverted from a given purpose. As for my own wandering vision, it has doubtless garnered much which remained hidden from Sir John Humberston and which would not, perhaps, have proved very serviceable to him if he had taken cognizance of it. That it has been of any practical service to me I am not prepared to assert ; but everybody must use the kind of sight with which he has been endowed by Nature. It

may have been some indirect exercise of mine that had kept me from saying a word to Vi about the calling which I had chosen and my recent hesitations respecting it. Now, however, it occurred to me that I should rather like to hear what her religious views were and whether she could help me towards a clearer comprehension of my own.

I was to obtain no such assistance. At my first words she cut me short with a cry of consternation.

“Oh, but, Peter, how appalling ! How utterly absurd and preposterous and not to be thought of ! The bare idea of you in a cassock and a white dog-collar makes me feel quite ill ! As for your *wanting* to be a clergyman, not for one moment do I believe it ! ”

“I was going to tell you,” I said, “that perhaps I don’t want it. I was going to give you some of the reasons——”

“You needn’t,” she interrupted ; “I don’t care to hear them. Reasons for being reasonable are always superfluous. Keep them for your father, who, I suspect, must have been the instigator of this proposed atrocity. But do tell him—tell him firmly and without loss of time—that he can’t have his wicked will. A don or a professor, if you like. It isn’t exactly what I should have chosen for you ; still at a pinch I could do with it. But what I most emphatically could *not* stand would be to hear you intoning the Litany through your nose. Promise

me, Peter, that, happen what may, you'll never consent to be a parson!"

I promised. I fear that I should have done so in any case, for her assumption of a proprietary interest in my future had brought my heart into my mouth ; but indeed under the actual circumstances she was forcing an open door. And it came to me, I must confess, as an immense relief that in one moment I had cut a knot—or rather had it cut for me—over which my clumsy fingers might yet have fumbled and bungled for many more weeks or months.

At Vi's reiterated suggestion, I went straight home and told my father. It was rather brutal of me, for I might have known, and ought to have known, that what I had to say would give him pain ; but I suppose it is only too true that overmastering love for one person is apt to mean total callousness towards the rest of humanity. Had I been in my normal condition, I should undoubtedly have approached him through my mother : as it was, I made, without hesitation or tremor, for the library, where I knew I should find him, and in a few ill-chosen words blurted out my announcement. He behaved extraordinarily well. He was not altogether taken by surprise, he told me, for symptoms of unrest on my part had not escaped him, and he had more than once been upon the point of asking me whether he could not give me some help.

" Of course you are right to dismiss the idea of taking Holy Orders if you feel that your faith has

been shaken or lost ; but don't act upon impulse or in haste. You can take a little time yet, and I think you ought. Many a man who believes as firmly as I do to-day has had tormenting doubts and overcome them. I should be the last to blame you for doubting, because I myself felt once upon a time that our revealed religion was incredible. And so, to human reason, it is. There is much in it against which one's reason rebels. Finally, however, I found that if it is not easy to accept Christianity, it is infinitely more difficult to reject it."

He put the case for faith as temperately and forcibly as he knew how, saying a good deal which I well remember, but am not going to quote here. He was talking to a deaf adder, though. Certainly I had conscientious scruples about becoming a candidate for Orders ; still my true reason for putting the project away from me at once and for ever was simply that a girl could not tolerate the vision of me in clerical garb. That not being an avowable reason, I had to make the most of the conscientious scruples. I was rather ashamed of myself, and was consequently gruff and curt ; but in the end I did make my father understand that I was determined. Whether he guessed what influences had been brought to bear upon me I cannot tell. It is not impossible that he did, for he was as observant as he was reticent ; but it would have been at variance with his custom to invite a confidence

which I might have been disinclined to repose in him. He closed the conversation by remarking quietly that I should now have to decide what was to be done with my life, but that that question could come up for discussion later.

All things considered, I must say that I was let down very easily. Neither from my father nor my mother did I hear one word of reproach ; although I knew that I must have sorely disappointed him, and when he suffered, so, as a matter of course, did she. It was, to say the least of it, tiresome of me to turn my back upon myself in that abrupt way, thus adding my contribution to the family cares, which were already numerous enough, and I ought to have been grateful for the forbearance shown me. I am afraid I was not. I had no thought for anybody but Vi, who signified approval of my prompt compliance with her behest, but did not appear to recognise all the significance of the step which I had taken.

“It was too fantastic of them!” said she, in amused reference to my parents. “Anybody could have told them, if they didn’t see it themselves, that you were no more born to be a parson than to be a chimney-sweep ; but parents, as a rule, are oddly ignorant about their offspring. I’m sure I don’t know what mine would do with me if they had their way.”

“But they won’t have their way?” I asked eagerly ; for I thought I knew very well what they would like to do with her.

"Not unless it happens to chime in with mine," she answered, smiling. "For good or for ill, I shall take my own way; so you may set your mind at ease upon that point, Peter."

She accompanied the above declaration with a glance which sent a thrill all through me, although she may not have meant it to do so. She must certainly have been aware that I loved her and must also have understood why I could not have the audacity to tell her that I did; yet I fancy that she was a trifle provoked by my reticence. Sometimes she all but invited an avowal on my part; but just as often it would please her to assume the *pose* of a friend at once attached and detached.

"You are not to go and marry without consulting me, Peter," she admonished me on one occasion. "I must be given a chance to disapprove of the young woman, as in all probability I shall. You're quite defenceless against young women, you know. Or, if you don't know it, you may take it from me that you are. Throw yourself upon my protection before you finally surrender."

I gravely replied that I doubted whether I should ever marry; but when she wanted to know why I said that I withheld the requested information. Shyness and timidity may have had something to do with my reserve; but I had one reason for silence which at the time seemed to me imperative and which, for that matter, I still think respectable. She was the only child of a very rich man: how could

I, without fortune or career, propose myself to her ? Worthy of her I could not become, and my prospect of acquiring wealth was microscopic ; yet something in the shape of success I might and must achieve, something that I could offer to her in an otherwise empty hand. As a rule, she easily divined what I was thinking about ; but this time she cannot have read me quite accurately, for she remarked, with a quick, impatient gesture :

“ After all, perhaps you can take care of yourself. You’re capable of a leap in the dark ; but I will say for you that, so long as there’s any light at all, you’re much fonder of looking than leaping.”

The date fixed for Daisy’s wedding was drawing near when Vi took my breath away by casually mentioning that neither she nor her people would be able to attend the function, as they were leaving Hallacombe.

“ Leaving Hallacombe ! ” I echoed blankly. “ But not for long ? ”

“ For goodness knows how long,” she answered. “ We shall be yachting for a few weeks ; then there will be Scotland, then Warwickshire, and then, I suppose, London until the end of the next session. It’s just possible that we might sandwich in Christmas here ; but that’s uncertain.”

If the green earth had given way beneath my feet and the blue heavens been rent asunder over my head, I could not have been more absurdly dumfounded. What had been imparted to me was

doubtless only the fulfilment of a stereotyped annual programme ; but I had somehow failed to realise that my eviction from Paradise was inevitable ; so my distress and bewilderment found vent in a forlorn cry of :

“ And what is to become of me ? ”

She laughed heartily. “ Dear Peter, it’s so nice of you to ask !—and to look broken-hearted about it too ! Well, I suppose you’ll soon go back to Oxford, won’t you ? Then you’ll have to keep me informed of your doings and what profession you decide to go in for—all about everything, in short. Write often and write copiously ; I’m sure you’re the kind of person who would write delightful letters. Unfortunately, I’m not. I enjoy a free use of the tongue, as you may have noticed, but I’m a poor performer with pen and paper. So you mustn’t mind if I don’t always answer or if I’m rather telegraphic in my style when I do.”

I stammered out lugubriously, “ D-d-don’t forget me, at least ! ”

“ The same to you ! ” she returned, still laughing. “ Time will show which of us deserves the highest marks for fidelity. I’m not sure that I entirely trust you, Peter.”

That was more than I could endure to hear. If I did not go all lengths in my expostulatory rejoinder, I went as far, no doubt, as she deemed desirable ; for she checked me by saying :

“ Oh, well, I withdraw and apologise. Now

I must apologise for withdrawing, because I've barely twenty minutes left in which to dress for dinner."

Whether it was by ill fortune or by design that I saw no more of her in private I cannot tell. That she was hampered by a succession of bothering engagements may have been true ; only I had never before known her allow herself to be hampered by engagements. I had to bid her good-bye at last in the presence of Lady Humberston and a large house-party. I did it hurriedly, uncouthly, and with the conviction—quite gratuitous, I daresay—that the spectators were laughing at me in their sleeves. Then I stumbled out of the long room, through the hall, past a knot of impassive servants and out into the hot air.

But my dear Vi would not let me go like that. Presently I heard her calling me and saw her standing framed by an open window. She beckoned to me to approach and thrust a little bunch of forget-me-nots into my hand.

"Just as a nice, old-fashioned reminder," said she. "There's sentiment for you ! Good-bye, Peter—good-bye ! "

She was some distance above me ; but I could just reach her fingers, and I boldly pressed them to my lips. The forget-me-nots I placed in a pocket-book which I have carried about the world with me all these years. It is in a sadly dilapidated condition to-day and the poor blackened myosotis

flowers are as dead as my dead youth. Death, indeed, is what they aptly symbolise ; unless perchance it be a fact—I almost think it is—that nothing really dies until it is forgotten.

CHAPTER VII

UNCLE CHARLES'S PRESCRIPTION

DURING my last term at Oxford I read with strenuous diligence, stimulated chiefly, no doubt, by the hope of laying a classical first at Vi Humberston's feet, but also, I like to believe, by a desire to make some amends to my harassed father for the blow which I had dealt him. That it had been a real and heavy blow I gathered from my mother's letters, not to speak of my own common sense when I recovered possession of it, as I gradually did. I knew I had behaved in a selfish, ill-conditioned way ; but—what could be said, save that love makes everybody selfish and that, Vi or no Vi, I must needs have disappointed him ? Well, I got my first. That much I did accomplish, and I may as well proclaim the circumstance with drum and trumpet, since it remains, I regret to say, the sole distinction that decks my record.

Conducted triumphantly home by Bob before Christmas, I found myself in the strange position of being, for once, the successful and admired member of the family. We were never slow to applaud one another's exploits, and for a day or two I did feel

that I was having the time of my life. Only for a day or two, though ; for my first visit to Hallacombe, where I had learnt to my great joy that the Humberstons were, after all, to spend Christmas, fell sadly short of the anticipations which I had formed of it in many a fond dream. I had faithfully kept my promise to Vi by writing to her at great length ; she, too, had been as good as her word, inasmuch as she had not always answered and that her answers, when they had come, had been laconic. Nevertheless, she had said some adorable things in them. All I asked of her, all I had any business to ask, was that she should welcome me on the old footing when we met again. This, unhappily, she did not—perhaps could not—quite manage. It was no fault of hers, to be sure, that trysts in the garden were impossible at that season of the year ; still there was something in the nature of an anticlimax, almost of a snub, in being forced to greet her, as I had parted from her, under the eyes of a bevy of strangers. And was it over sensitive of me to feel a little hurt by her off-hand method of felicitating me upon my honours ?

“ So you secured the what’s-its-name all right. But that was a dead certainty. I knew it would be as easy for you as tumbling downstairs.”

It had been anything but easy to win a victory of which I had refrained from informing her through the post in order that I might have the joy of doing so by word of mouth ; but of course she had no

notion of what a classical first implied. I observed that other people had not felt her flattering confidence in my ability.

"Oh, because other people have got into the habit of taking you at your own valuation," she returned. "If you will persist in assuring all and sundry that you are a duffer, they naturally conclude that you ought to know. However, I'm glad to hear that you now occupy a pedestal on the domestic hearth. Your brother has been telling me about it."

It was at that moment that I despaired Arthur, occupying a metaphorical pedestal on the neighbouring hearth and surrounded by a flock of tea-drinking ladies. He had not said that he proposed to call at Hallacombe, nor was I aware that he was so much as acquainted with the Humberstons; but it would not have been in the least unlike him to pay his respects without waiting for the formality of an introduction; for although he was no coxcomb, he had all his life been encouraged in the belief that he might take liberties if he pleased. Vi, at any rate, it appeared, had neither seen him before nor resented his unceremonious intrusion.

"One never gets to the end of the surprise packet that you are," she remarked. "Who would have suspected you of having a brother like that up your sleeve! Absolutely the most beautiful young man I ever beheld!"

I hardly know why so frank a tribute to Arthur's unquestionable good looks should have sent a

jealous stab to my heart. Something in her way of looking at him and not looking at me while she spoke, perhaps. Evidently he interested her; it might be that I had ceased to do so. I made I forget what surly response (I always sound surly when I am hurt), and she turned away.

Presently I was listening to Lady Humberston's recital of the illustrious personages with whom she had been staying or who had been staying with her. She made queer little greedy noises in enumerating their titles, smacking her lips over them as if they had been something nice to eat. "The Duchess made me promise to send her my photograph," I heard her say; but, my attention being engaged elsewhere, I did not gather which of the duchesses had expressed so quaint a fancy. Vi, enclosed in a hollow square of young men and maidens, gave me no further chance of approaching her. Either because I had annoyed her or because (dire alternative!) she no longer cared to monopolise me, I was ignored until the moment of leave-taking came, and then, in reply to a faltering appeal from me, she raised her eyebrows and shook her head laughingly.

"No good this time, I'm afraid," said she. "We're only here for a few more days, and if you knew how full those days are! Charmed if you'll come again and take your chance, though."

As I left the house with Arthur, I told myself decisively that I would not go there again. Why

should I go where I was not wanted ? I had been pretty plainly told that I was not wanted, and one does not care to receive such an intimation a second time. I don't think I was angry with Vi ; my love for her was not to be changed or lessened by anything that she could do or leave undone ; but I was, I confess, angry with myself. What a goose she must have been thinking me all those months !

Arthur observed that Miss Humberston wasn't half a bad sort, but that Papa and Mamma were rather comic. He added that they had asked him to look them up in London and that he thought he would, his regiment being now quartered at Hounslow.

"They would be sure to do one well in the way of food, and the old boy has a deer-forest too. No, it wouldn't be right or kind to drop them."

I did not return to Hallacombe, nor did I hear another word from Vi ; so it may be believed that my Christmas was the reverse of happy. Happy it could hardly have been in any event ; for if I had acquired merit of an academic order, I continued to be under a cloud which the season perforce darkened. My father and mother were generously, and I think wisely, forbearing ; but I cannot say as much for Mr. Rimmington, who took me to task in the manner of an angry schoolmaster. At the time his scoldings and objurgations had no effect upon me beyond the unfortunate one of causing me to revise

my estimate of him : now that he is long dead and I am elderly, I understand that a man of his stamp could not have spoken otherwise than as he did. Sympathising and successful with open evil-doers, he was unable to tolerate—was perhaps barely able to give credence to—infidelity. How, he indignantly asked, did I dare to doubt ? He did not ask whether I wished to doubt, nor did he appear to give me credit for any wish to have my doubts removed. I suppose he did not look upon it as a case for argument. His attitude was very much that of the Church of Rome, which virtually says to her children, “Open your mouth, shut your eyes tight and receive with meekness the spiritual food which is able to save your souls.” It is a welcome injunction to the great mass of mankind, who, in matters of religion, desire nothing more ardently than to be freed from the heavy burden of deciding for themselves what is true and what is not ; but it has always seemed to me to labour under the disadvantage of involving an impossibility. It is, of course, easy enough for any man to say *Credo* ; but how can he give up his right of private judgment ? Does he not exercise it—exercise it most portentously—in making that act of surrender ? As, however, it was useless to talk in such a way to Mr. Rimmington, I soon took refuge in silence. “Obstinate and sullen,” was the verdict that he delivered to my father. So I heard from Uncle Charles, who was paying us his customary Christmas visit and who

was really distressed at a state of things for which he took some blame to himself.

"I ought to have held my silly tongue," he remorsefully confessed. "I believe you did ask for my opinions ; but that was no reason for answering. Indeed, for the matter of that, what do I know ? The very essence of my opinions, if you can call them opinions, is that I don't know. Your father and the parson and the whole Catholic Church in all its branches shout aloud that they do know. Hadn't you better listen to them ? "

I assured my kind-hearted uncle that if he had never existed, I could not, when it came to the pinch, have taken Orders. The only question was what profession I was to adopt, in lieu of that impossible one.

There he thought he could perhaps be of service to me. Say what I might, he felt a certain responsibility for my future, and what he advised was that I should go up to London and "have a look round." He would give me introductions and keep an eye upon me. He had a numerous acquaintance, which included some highly-placed officials ; he did not think it would lie beyond his power to secure some sort of a billet for a young fellow who had graduated with honours. "And anyhow, I expect you won't be very sorry to get away from home for a bit, eh ? "

It was true that I could not feel altogether comfortable at home, notwithstanding—or to some

extent by reason of—my father's magnanimity ; but I am afraid that if I jumped at Uncle Charles's suggestion, it was chiefly because London would mean proximity to Vi. Though she had hurt me, she had not estranged me, nor could I stifle the hope that when we next met I might find her in an altered mood.

Shortly after this a family council was held, the upshot of which was that I was bidden to depart for the metropolis in peace. Poor mother, I believe, objected a little on the score of expense (she may have had other objections and misgivings which she did not mention) ; but my father was not the man to grudge a few hundreds for his son's advancement in life. He was always quite clear that he must do his duty to his children ; he was never in the least clear as to how many hundreds he might have lying at his bankers'.

If my dear mother had spoken all that was in her mind, she would probably have said that to toss a young man who had been destined from boyhood for the Church into the midst of the multifarious perils and temptations of town life was a somewhat risky proceeding, and very likely she thought that emancipation from religious safeguards rendered me additionally vulnerable. Very likely it did ; but my naturally sober temperament—for which, of course, I claim no credit—together with my unshakable love for Vi Humberston, provided me with all that was needed in the shape of defensive

armour. If during my sojourn in Bury Street, where rooms had been secured for me, I took part in sundry carousals and was made acquainted with the life of the average gay youth, I did little more thereby than slightly expand my horizon. Through Uncle Charles I got to know a few subalterns in the Guards, certain of whom had been at Eton with me ; through Arthur I was brought into occasional relations with a somewhat wilder *coterie*, composed for the most part of his brother officers. Hence a species of initiation, as to which I have only to say that it did not take me much beyond the initiatory stage. I never played for high stakes ; I never drank more wine than I could carry ; I never saw the fun of backing horses without having set eyes upon them ; I never risked more than a sovereign or so upon those that I did see at race meetings which were too often spoilt for Arthur by their unexpected results. I mention these things because I was afterwards reported to have wasted my time with riotous associates. The truth was that my associates (finding me so little riotous !) did not give me a great deal of their society and that my time was only wasted because I could hit upon no use for it. Uncle Charles's bigwigs, to whom I was duly presented, had civil words for me, but did not appear for the moment to have anything else.

Not until the early spring did I make up my mind to call at Sir John Humberston's town residence in Grosvenor Place. Up to then I had been hoping

always for a signal from Vi, to whom I had abstained from writing ; but none came, so I ended by saying to myself that I would at least ascertain whether the emblematic flowers which she had once given me ought to be returned to her or not. Lady Humberston was not at home, and I had not quite courage enough to ask for Miss Humberston. I handed in my cards and was turning away when a brougham dashed up to the door, and who should spring out of it but Vi herself !

“ Dear Peter ! ” she cried, holding out both her hands to me ; “ what luck to have just caught you ! Come in this minute and be catechised ! I thought I was never going to see you again ! ”

Soon I was seated opposite to her in what she told me was her private *sanctum*, an exquisite blue-and-white place, full—perhaps a little too full—of beautiful things and fragrant with stacks of cut flowers. That I was flustered and speechless was of the less consequence because she seemed to be in no hurry to catechise me. She talked a great deal. I do not remember what she said ; possibly I did not hear much of it at the time. What overjoyed me was that she was her old self and that she was glad, really, unaffectedly glad, to have me with her once more. She did not ask why I had left her so long without news of me, and I thought this rather odd of her until she said :

“ You give in, then ? But of course you do, or you wouldn’t be here. Oh, don’t put on that

inquiring face ; you know quite well what I mean, and I know quite well why I have been boycotted. That was you all over, Peter ! Well, now perhaps you realise that other people can have their little share of proper pride too."

Need I say that I abased myself before her and craved pardon forthwith ? It was not worth while to point out anything so obvious as that what she was pleased to call pride had been in truth humility ; whether she or I had been in the wrong was a matter of no moment. We were friends again, which was all I cared about.

" So you're to be Mr. Majendie's private secretary," she astonished me by remarking, after a time.

Mr. Majendie, whom I as yet knew only by name, was Secretary of State for the Colonies. It was true that he would soon be requiring a new private secretary, and Uncle Charles, being intimate with him, had some hope of obtaining the post for me ; but this was no more than a shadowy possibility and a secret one into the bargain.

" Who could have told you that ? " I asked. " I don't suppose I have an outside chance of being appointed."

She said Arthur had told her, and went on : " Oh, but you *are* going to be appointed ; you simply *must* be ! It's the first step on the ladder that leads up to—well, to the stars. I don't see why you shouldn't be Prime Minister before you die.

But I'm afraid you're not as ambitious as I am, Peter."

"Are you ambitious?" I asked.

"For you—yes," she answered, smiling at me.

Such a reply more than made amends for the passing twinge which her mention of Arthur had given me. He had said nothing to me of visits to Grosvenor Place; but it seemed that he had dined there more than once and that he was in high favour with Sir John and Lady Humberston. To be in favour with all the world was as much his ingenerate condition as to be out of it was mine. I made that observation with perhaps just a touch of envy and bitterness, which seemed to amuse Vi.

"Everybody likes peaches," she returned; "it takes a cultivated palate to appreciate olives."

After that delicate compliment I could not mind her praise of Arthur, who, she said, was delightful to look at and whose manners were charming; but I was given to understand that she did not think very much of his brains. Rightly or wrongly—wrongly, I must conclude, if results are to be the criterion—she had formed an exalted estimate of mine, and just as she had once commanded me to take a first, so she now ordained that that secretaryship must fall to my share.

"These things aren't the reward of ability, you know," I objected.

"Oh yes, they are," she returned. "Mr. Majendie won't be such a fool as to reject ability;

all you will have to do will be to persuade him that you possess it."

"I wish," said I, changing the subject, "that I could persuade *you* of my inability to get on without seeing you sometimes. When may I come again?"

At this she shook her head doubtfully. "Ah, I don't know. We aren't at Hallacombe, worse luck! All my days and hours are pledged for ever so long, and I'm afraid you wouldn't care to be invited to dinners or dances or crushes, would you?"

"Not a bit," I answered.

"So what is to be done? I might drop you a line when I think I see an oasis ahead, if that will do."

"That will do very well indeed, thank you," I replied.

"Good! You shall hear, then, as soon as it's possible. Only please don't be cross with me if I can't compass impossibilities. Promise not to be cross with me any more, Peter, because I don't like it at all."

I left Grosvenor Place, walking on air. If she could not achieve impossibilities, I was well-nigh ready to believe that I could. She had infected me with her optimism to the extent that I pictured myself rising from a humble private secretaryship to a seat in Parliament, to honours and glories which, after all, had been won by men who had started from smaller beginnings than I. It was for her sake, not for theirs or my own, that I coveted such

things ; I felt as if I could do anything for her sake. No doubt most men have, at one time or another in their lives, entertained a similar enthusiastic conviction. But the sober, grey truth—which, mercifully, we so seldom recognise—is that we can do nothing at all outside the limits imposed upon us by our character.

CHAPTER VIII

TRIBULATION

M R. MAJENDIE, who was an old school-fellow of my uncle's and who must therefore have been on the shady side of forty, was nevertheless a youngish man—erect, clear-eyed and with that undefinable air of vitality which one so often notices in the successful. Rumour credited him with numerous successes other than the political ones which had raised him to Cabinet rank. I met him at dinner at Uncle Charles's club and was presented to him, without any beating about the bush, as an aspirant.

“Now, Majendie, here you are! Here's my talented nephew for you, and I should say he was the very young man you're after.”

Mr. Majendie laughed pleasantly, shook me by the hand and remarked that an astonishing number of young men seemed to be after him just then. He talked a little to me—not a great deal—during the dinner, at which several others were present; but before he left he asked me to call upon him at the Colonial Office.

This I accordingly did, and found him very

amiably disposed, if in rather a hurry. He asked me a few quick questions, appeared to think my replies up to the mark and dismissed me with an intimation that the affair was as good as settled. He had, however, promised to see various other candidates and must keep his promises to them—or, to speak more accurately, to the ladies who were interested in them.

“ Ah, these ladies ! ” he concluded, throwing up his hands and laughing. “ They have to be placated, and I assure you, Mr. Vaux, it’s no simple matter to placate them.”

Soon afterwards I had a friendly note from him, in which he said that, as he would not be losing the services of his present secretary for a week or two, it was not yet necessary for him to come to a final decision, but that he hoped, and he might add expected, to pronounce in my favour. So that sounded satisfactory enough, and very glad I was to be able to impart something in the shape of good tidings to my mother, whose recent letters had revealed, without expressing, a tinge of anxiety. Anxious, poor soul, she could not but be, with the unmanageable finances of the establishment on her hands, and unhappily further financial problems of the first magnitude were in store for her. One afternoon Arthur marched into my room, let himself drop down upon an armchair and announced that he was going to commit suicide.

“ How does one get cyanide of potassium, Peter ?

Does one just go to a chemist and say one wants it for wasps, or do they insist upon a doctor's order ? "

"I suppose you have been running up bills again," said I.

Yes, he had been doing that, "of course"; but that was only one feature of the calamity. He had lost a pot of money at auction bridge, he had backed "also rans" with disastrous consistency, finally, he had backed a bill for a friend who had also run and was quite unlikely to return. No doubt, he said, he could sell his polo ponies and the rest of his belongings; but the sum thus realised would not come anywhere near preserving him from bankruptcy. Consequently he could see nothing for it but to put an end to a misspent existence.

Nobody could look at him and feel any apprehension of his plunging thus prematurely into eternity. Nor could one think of upbraiding him. Arthur, when he incurred grief which would have been pronounced to serve anybody else right, was wont to observe pensively that it was deuced hard lines, and somehow or other his hearers always felt that it was. I think his personal beauty may have had a good deal to do with this, though a certain simplicity of aspect and appeal was doubtless a contributing factor. His appeal to me on this occasion was evidently not so much to provide him with poison as to get him out of a ghastly mess if I could, and I at once set to work to see whether I could render first aid in any form. However, I soon

perceived that it was much too big a job for me ; so I could only suggest consulting Uncle Charles, a proposal to which Arthur reluctantly assented, though he predicted that it wouldn't be the slightest good.

We walked across to Dover Street, where Uncle Charles lived, and, finding him at home, laid the case before him. He had a benign temper and, like the rest of the world, was prone to make excuses for Arthur ; but this time he said in forcible language what he had every right to think. Uncle Charles, I imagine, was pretty well-to-do. Many a handsome tip had we had from him in our school-days, and I daresay Arthur may have been indebted to him for some pecuniary assistance at a later period. Still he was not fond of throwing his money away. He took occasion to mention that he was not.

“ If you want somebody to ruin himself in order to pull you out of the mud for a time, my boy,” said he to Arthur, “ you’ve come to the wrong man. I suppose that’s what you do want ; for you can’t be serious in asking me to give you advice. The only thing I can advise you to do is to write to your father.”

“ But that’s the very thing that’s so awful ! ” sighed Arthur.

“ It has got to be done, though, and I tell you plainly that if I were he, I should let you go pop. Sooner or later it must come to that. Well, I’ll write to him if you like. I don’t mind relieving you

of that unpleasant duty ; but I'll be shot if I'll relieve you in any other way. I couldn't, even if I were the fool you seem to take me for."

Arthur, as we walked away, observed deprecatingly that the old chap needn't have insulted him. I myself had been a little hurt by Uncle Charles's assumption that we had come to him as beggars ; though I could not resist a conviction that he was right as to the futility of staving off my spendthrift brother's bankruptcy. Whether, indeed, it could be staved off was extremely doubtful, and I feared that, considerations of money apart, my father and mother would feel this fiasco of their firstborn's as a bitter disgrace.

Yet I am not sure that they did. My father would undoubtedly have considered bankruptcy a disgrace, and he refused to hear of such a solution, intimating his acceptance of the sole alternative. On the other hand, he quietly and peremptorily decreed that Arthur's military career must terminate. The regiment was an expensive one, and he could not afford to allow him £2,000 a year, at which rate he appeared to have been living, without taking betting and gambling losses into account. His liabilities would be met ; but he would have to send in his papers forthwith.

My father came up to London and delivered himself as above in an interview with Arthur which the latter described as "simply annihilating." I daresay it may have been rather bad ; though Uncle

Charles grumbled at what he called his brother's short-sighted clemency. Met I believe Arthur's liabilities were ; how I am unable to conceive. Certain pictures, I know, went up to Christie's, and I should not be surprised if Uncle Charles, notwithstanding his disclaimer, had lent a hand. If so, he must have done it surreptitiously ; for it is not at all likely that my father would have consented to be indebted to him. Arthur, for his part, would : it was one of the endearing features of Arthur's character that he was ever ready to accept benefactions in such a way as to give pleasure to the benefactor. Perhaps I had better explain that I am not speaking ironically. Any number of people will accept, not to say demand, favours ; but only a very few know how to do it with a good grace.

Arthur took everything with a good grace. It cannot have been easy or agreeable for him to leave his regiment, suffer social eclipse and be led down to Devonshire in a leash, as it were, so as to be kept out of mischief ; but he carried it all off with a sort of whimsical self-abasement and resignation which may have been his fashion of exhibiting contrition.

“ Peter, old thing,” were his last words to me on the departure platform at Paddington, whither I had accompanied him and my father, “ the family now looks to you and Bob to make amends for my deplorable breakdown. Be virtuous, Peter, and although you won’t be happy—because you aren’t built that way—you’ll be more or less comfortable.”

Uncle Charles prophesied that Arthur would shortly marry a rich widow, and hoped the lady would drive him in a sharp bit, because, hang it! that was what the young ruffian needed. Well, he was glad to think that Bob, who was eating his dinners at the Inner Temple, was as steady as could be desired, and that I, provided I had the wit to make a friend of Majendie, might now be regarded as launched upon a fairly safe career.

I will not deny that I was just then feeling on good terms with myself. Probably Arthur was right in saying that mine is not a happy disposition, and the future which seemed to lie ahead of me may not have been exactly what I should have selected ; still it had its glittering possibilities ; added to which, it had commended itself to Vi. I longed to go to her and say : "Well, you told me to take a first and I took a first ; you told me to get this secretaryship and I've got it. What next ?" But I remembered that I was to wait for a summons from her, and I also thought that it behoved me to await a definite summons from Mr. Majendie. I waited rather a long time ; then one morning the following note reached me from the Colonial Office :

"DEAR MR. VAUX,—I have been considering the question about which we had some conversation, and I regret to say that I do not find your handwriting satisfactory. This, of course, is an

important point, and, glad though I should have been to oblige my old friend Colonel Vaux, as well as yourself, I cannot, under the circumstances, see my way to avail myself of your assistance.

“ Faithfully yours,
“ J. MAJENDIE.”

I write a particularly legible hand. If Mr. Majendie did not want me he might have found some more plausible excuse than that for throwing me over ; or he might have thrown me over, as he was perfectly entitled to do, without making any excuse at all. I heard afterwards that the secretaryship had been bestowed upon the younger son of a well-known lady. No doubt the well-known lady was one of those whose importunities the poor man found it hard to resist. First and last, I have had my full share of disappointments ; but I do not know that any of them has rankled so persistently as that. I was very angry at the time, and even now a hot wave sweeps over me when I think of it. Even now I cannot hear the name of Majendie without a sensation of nausea. Vindictive and unreasonable, if you like ; but—*c'est plus fort que moi*. One measures injustices by their effects, I suppose, rather than by their inherent malevolence.

In the matter of injustice I was to have some further cause for complaint, though it took no overt shape. Dear old Uncle Charles was too staunch a friend to say that I had forfeited a fine opening by

my own fault ; but I am afraid that was what he thought, and I am afraid my parents thought so too. That Mr. Majendie had rejected me for the reason assigned was clearly incredible ; so they may well have conjectured that he had something else against me which he did not care to specify. Moreover, this fresh mishap came at a bad moment, and although I had never a word of reproach from either of them, I could read between the lines of their letters what they inevitably felt.

I was for the time being too down in the mouth to grieve much over the non-arrival of Vi's promised notification. I shrank from presenting myself to her as a defeated man, and, despite the collapse of my first venture, I was not without hope of securing some employment, or promise of it, ere long. I therefore allowed several weeks to pass, in the course of which I answered sundry advertisements and offered my services to divers persons who declined them. But at length there came a day when I found all of a sudden that I could endure silence and suspense no more ; so off I marched to Grosvenor Place—only to be informed that Lady and Miss Humberston were out of town. Her ladyship had been very unwell and had gone down to Hallacombe some time ago for rest. I was still on the doorstep when Sir John emerged, stared hard at me and ended by recognising me.

“ Young Vaux, isn't it ? Yes, yes. How do you do ?—how do you do ? My wife and daughter are

down in your part of the world. My wife has been poorly, I'm sorry to say. Wish I could join her ; but this session seems likely to last until the autumn and I haven't been able to get a pair. Well, I must be off. Remember me to your good mother when you write home."

I had a little giggle at the vision of what my good mother's face would have been like if she had heard herself thus patronisingly alluded to ; but my merriment was brief. It was indeed one of the mockeries wherein Fortune is said to delight that Vi should be amongst the woods and meadows for which my soul pined and which might have given me so many chances of converse with her, while I remained a prisoner in a city which had no apparent use for me. The summer was now at its height, and I would fain have given myself a holiday ; but what title had I to holidays who had not as yet done a hand's turn of work ? Such a thing could not be suggested.

Fortune, however, has compassionate moments, and a few days later the suggestion was made, though not by me. My mother wrote that there did not seem to be much present advantage in my remaining in London, that it was costing money, of which there was none to spare, and that she was sure I must need a change. " All this," she ended, " is only—or at any rate chiefly—to say that you are wanted here. Both Cicely and I want you. In fact, we can't dispense with you any longer."

I did not wait to be asked twice. The pleasantest thing that can be said to me (it has not very often been said), is that somebody wants me ; so I reached Chivenham within twenty-four hours. Cicely was at the station to meet me with her governess-cart, and I at once detected a hint of pity in her kind, smiling face. At first I was afraid that she had some bad news for me ; but it appeared from her answers to my questions that there was nothing amiss at home ; so I took it that she was only sorry for me on account of my ill success. I told her of what I could not but regard as Mr. Majendie's bad faith, and she agreed that he had behaved like a perfect pig.

"But perhaps it's just as well," she observed, "because you would never have been able to get on with a man of that sort. Don't be discouraged about it, Peter ; something better will turn up for you by-and-by."

It has ever been one of Cicely's missions in life to cheer up the downhearted. She took particular pains with me that afternoon, and I hope she understood that, for all my hang-dog mien, I was not unappreciative. The truth is that, glad as I was to be at home again, I did not half like returning as one more useless appendage to an impoverished household.

We found the house empty and silent ; but hardly had we stepped out of one of the open windows before we saw mother hurrying towards us

across the lawn, her grey hair blown back from her eager face and her arms stretched wide to me. Well, I suppose it would be an unnatural sort of mother who did not love her own offspring ; but I am so little lovable that demonstrations of affection are apt to upset me, and perhaps the tears were not very far from my eyes when I kissed her and stuttered out something about a “pr-pr-prodigal son.”

“Oh, but you’re not to call yourself that !” she protested, thumping my back with her small fist. “How dare you use such language ! Arthur, perhaps, if you like. . . . Though I’m sure he never would,” she concluded, with a short laugh.

She made me stand away, surveyed me from head to foot and pronounced me older. Alas ! I could have passed a similar criticism upon her ; for she had aged perceptibly and care had left its traces about her eyes and mouth. However, she declared that she had never been better in her life.

“Now come along and have some tea,” said she. “I left the others having theirs in the shade.”

There were only two others. They and the tea-table were conspicuously white against the dark background of that same copper beech which had spread its branches over me and Vi Humberston on a memorable occasion. Now, as then, she was seated upon the dry grass, and by her side Arthur, clad in flannels, was stretched at full length. My recollection is that I realised the situation and its

significance in a flash ; but I may be wrong about that. One's memory gets blurred by the succession of events, so that one can hardly tell at what precise moment one first received an impression. In any case I could not long have remained blind to what so plainly announced itself. I remember that Arthur removed his cigarette from his lips to ejaculate, "Good old Peter !" and that Vi, without rising, held out her hand to me.

I need scarcely say that I was awkward and confused—or that she was neither. Of course I had to talk to her as to an ordinary acquaintance, and of course no allusion was made to our last meeting in London. Much less did she explain how it was that I found her upon a footing of evident intimacy at Chivenham. Something was said about Lady Humberston's illness. Mother, it appeared, had often gone over to Hallacombe to sit with her and had thought her looking a little better that day. For the rest, we conversed upon I know not what topics by the space of half an hour or thereabouts. Then Vi got up and said she must be going ; whereupon Arthur also scrambled to his feet and they strolled off together.

Now I understood why Cicely had looked sorry for me. I understood other things into the bargain. An heiress who has youth and beauty is doubtless preferable to a moneyed widow, and a prodigal son may well be pardoned his bygone prodigality if, instead of requiring a fatted calf, he pays homage to

a golden one. 'But Vi ? . . . Why should she lend herself—if indeed she was lending herself—to a somewhat sordid and ignoble transaction ? I am not, Heaven knows, combative, and to pit myself against Arthur would, generally speaking, have struck me as ludicrous presumption ; yet the meekest of mortals will turn at bay when he is threatened with the loss of what is dearer to him than life. If until that moment I had scarcely recognised what my, possibly crazy, hopes were, I could no longer either doubt or dismiss them, and my great love for Vi made me silently swear that I would sit down under defeat at nobody's bidding save hers.

CHAPTER IX

SNUFFED OUT

I HAD seen what I had seen and had drawn my own conclusions (with just a lingering shred of hope that they might prove erroneous); but I made no inquiries and received no further information that evening. We had a few people staying in the house for some neighbouring show or other—floral, agricultural or possibly political—also that I should have had few opportunities of interrogating my family even if I had wished to do so.

Arthur and I sat up smoking until a rather late hour, and he confided to me that he was finding the simple life a little wearisome.

“ But after all that’s happened I’m bound to be good, and, much as I dislike to blow my own trumpet, I can’t help saying that the whole Young Men’s Christian Association isn’t in it with me. In me, Peter, you behold the bond-slave of duty.”

He did not mention the Humberstons, nor did I. It was easily imaginable that he might represent to himself and others as a duty what most men would have counted an inestimable privilege; but I was not anxious to hear him say that in so many words.

What I was anxious for—what I told myself in the course of the night that I meant to have—was an understanding with Vi. Anything, I thought, was better than suspense, and I did feel, whether mistakenly or not, that she owed it to me to define my position and her own. On the following afternoon, therefore, I made for Hallacombe, only hoping that I might not find Arthur already there.

I was so far fortunate that I found Lady Humberston and Vi alone in a small room which was, I presume, the former's boudoir. Poor Lady Humberston was barely recognisable. Shrunken, yellow and tremulous, she seemed to have added twenty years to her age, and it was rather pathetic to hear her murmuring peevishly at the indisposition which had forced her to cancel all her engagements. She said that my mother had been very kind in coming frequently to cheer her up ; but she was dissatisfied with her doctor, who, she complained, persisted in exhorting her to have patience.

" As if one could help having patience when one is powerless ! I haven't much with him, I'm free to confess."

She did not appear to have much with anybody, poor lady, nor, I am afraid, had I much with her ; for she kept on making small querulous demands upon her daughter, and it looked as if my visit would have to be paid less to her daughter than to her. At last, however, a trained nurse came in, and

the invalid, saying that it was time for her to take her afternoon's rest—"Not that I get any!"—was wheeled away.

I had always, to tell the truth, regarded Vi's parents as lay figures, and as such she herself had generally appeared to treat them; but I saw that she was uneasy and unhappy about her mother, so I could not plunge straightway into the subject of my own uneasiness and unhappiness. I had to begin by saying how sorry I was to see Lady Humberston so ill; to which Vi replied, with a sigh:

"Yes; but I wish you hadn't put on quite such a commiserating face. She gets dreadfully depressed sometimes. I suppose you couldn't help it, though. I can't always help it myself, in spite of Mrs. Vaux's beautiful and unfailing example."

We exchanged a few commonplaces—the kind of things that one says when there isn't anything to be said—then Vi suddenly shook the whole matter, as it were, off her shoulders.

"Come out into the garden," she bade me; "come out and talk."

And when we were in the open air, "So you didn't get the secretaryship after all," she remarked.

"No," I answered gloomily, "I didn't get the secretaryship."

"Annoying of you, Peter—annoying and disconcerting. I rather particularly wanted you to get that billet."

"I rather particularly wanted it myself," I

returned ; "but I couldn't make Mr. Majendie want me."

"Couldn't you ? I should have thought that that was just what you could have done if you had chosen."

I made no rejoinder. Since she seemed disposed to condemn me unheard, I did not care to defend myself, and we paced along for some little distance in silence.

"I have been seeing a great deal of your brother lately," Vi resumed abruptly and, as I fancied, with a hint of challenge in her voice.

"So I gathered," said I.

"Yes, he comes and pours out his grievances in the prettiest way. He can't pour them out at home, poor fellow, because being at home is the chief of them."

I could not help saying that I was sorry to hear it ; whereupon Vi implored me not to remind her that I had once been in training for a clerical career.

"Your brother," she went on, "may be as fond of home in the abstract as anybody else ; but it's a little cruel to sentence him to live there, with nothing to do except compare notes with a fellow sufferer. He is rather fond of expatiating upon himself, I'll allow ; but he couldn't, after all, have a more attractive theme."

"Of course, if you find it so," said I, "it's all right."

Vi raised an admonishing finger. "Who promised not to be cross?" she asked.

"I don't think I did," I replied. "I believe I was told to promise. But, as a matter of fact, I'm not cross, I'm only——"

"Well?" she inquired, as I did not know how to finish my sentence.

I had to remain mute. In the privacy of my bedroom I might resolve to come to a clear understanding; but with what sort of a face was I to tell her that I loved her? I, whose sole asset was my homely person! And upon what pretext, short of an avowal, could I demand an account of her actions?

She came to my aid presently by saying: "Well, if you won't tell me what you are, I'll tell you. You're jealous, Peter. Don't you think that's rather absurd and unwarrantable of you? Remember the classic dog in the manger who made a proverb of himself for all time because he couldn't eat corn and wouldn't let those eat it who could."

"That was the horses' way of putting the case," I observed. "I suppose the dog was comfortable where he was, and anyhow he was there first."

"The manger didn't belong to him, though. If the horses had tried to eat the straw out of his kennel, that would have been a different matter."

"In other words, he ought to have understood that corn was for his betters and that kennel straw was good enough for him. Yes, that may be so;

still it wasn't wonderful that he should growl a little."

"I think," said Vi, "I'll now drop metaphor and merely point out that it isn't very nice of you to growl at me for behaving with neighbourly civility to your brother."

"I don't mind your being neighbourly and civil," I told her.

"That's so kind of you. Then what is it that you do mind, please?"

"Oh, I think you know," I made bold to reply.

I am sure she did; yet I suppose she could not have admitted as much. Her rejoinder was:

"Peter, it seems to me that you are trying to make yourself insufferable. That's easily done, if you're bent upon it; only I shall be sorry if you are. A friend is a friend, and I should hate to lose your friendship; but I'm afraid I can't allow you to be a dictator."

Well, if that was not plain speaking, it was plain enough for me. I might continue to be her friend, subject to reasonable conditions; more than a friend I had never been to her and never could be. So, since I had wanted to have my position defined, there it was for me, and I could go home as soon as I pleased.

I went home as soon as possible, taking a heavy heart with me. We do not always know what extravagant visions we have cherished until they are snuffed out. If up to that time I had been asked,

or had asked myself, whether I imagined that Vi Humberston could ever marry me, I should doubtless have answered in the negative ; yet the thought of her marrying anybody else was as bitter as gall to me.

Small blame to my kith and kin if it was sweeter than honey to them. They had not sought a solution of their embarrassments which they could not do otherwise than welcome ; they had not thrown Arthur at Miss Humberston's head ; they had simply looked on while he paid his addresses, accompanying him, as was but natural, with their best wishes. If mother had shown some kindly attentions to Lady Humberston it was because she had been unable to withhold sympathy from the poor woman, whom she knew to be suffering from a grave disease. As for my father, who had that silent pride of birth which lingers to a greater extent amongst the country gentry nowadays than in more exalted quarters, he probably thought that an alliance with a Vaux of Chivenham would be no trifling honour for a Humberston. Cicely told me all about it. She said—and I was fain to agree with her—that this match, if Arthur was in earnest about it and if it came off, would be our salvation. Not only would it be the immediate salvation of Arthur, which was important, but it would insure peace for father's and mother's declining years, since they would know that the next owner of the property must be a rich man. Her one fear was that Arthur might not be in earnest.

" Sometimes he seems to be ; but then again he behaves as if he really didn't care. Arthur has always been so desperately casual ! "

" Is Miss Humberston in earnest ? " I asked.

" Well—I think so. Of course one can't be sure, but I fancy that he piques her a little by his occasional airs of indifference. And as for being in love with him, who wouldn't fall in love with Arthur ? "

Who, indeed ! As far as my opportunities of judging had gone, every woman to whom he addressed a dozen words fell in love with him then and there. To me Vi could never be a woman like another ; still she might be, and probably was, like the others in that respect. I said we must hope that Arthur would recognise his duty to the family, and I denied my good Cicely any opening for verbal condolences with me. Unuttered compassion I saw that she felt ; but she, on her side, doubtless saw that I was in no mood to be grateful for speech.

It is customary to speak in a jocular fashion of visits to the dentist, sea-sickness and the pangs of unrequited love, although not one of these is in truth a laughing matter. Never will I, for my part, laugh at a lovelorn youth ; too well I know what agonies the poor devil may be enduring. Those weeks of summer and early autumn were for me a veritable purgatory, and it was one from which there was no escape, London at that season being

unavailable as a plea for absenting myself, even if I had felt it possible to ask for journey money. I met Vi—was constrained to meet her—many times, but only once without witnesses. On that occasion I gave offence by my churlishness, and thenceforth she practically ignored me. I had not meant to be churlish ; I can truly say that I bore her no ill will ; but as any resumption of our old intimacy was out of the question, I could not be at ease with her and wore, I can well believe, every appearance of being in the sulks.

I don't think I was sulky with Arthur, and I don't suppose it ever entered into his head that he had eclipsed me. What was in that perfectly shaped head of his I would have given a good deal to know ; but he was not communicative. I could only hope that he was in love with Vi, for I soon became convinced that she loved him. I am now inclined to doubt whether Arthur was really capable of being in love with anybody. My impression is that, although he was charming with women and intermittently sedulous in his attentions to them, they rather quickly bored him. His victories, it may be, had proved too easy and too frequent. It was, at all events, plain that he was in no hurry to bring this affair to a climax. As Cicely had remarked, he had alternate hot and cold fits, and, as I speedily had occasion to remark, he could not have adopted more able tactics had he been as astute as he was heedless. Vi, who, one might conjecture, had never been

treated like that before in all her life, was sure to determine upon his subjugation—was perhaps equally sure to be herself subjugated. At any rate, that was what happened. Her voice when she spoke to him and her eyes when she looked at him betrayed her.

Once or twice Arthur went away for a few days—to interview his tailor and his bootmaker, he said. I presume that, unlike me, he did not scruple to ask for the wherewithal, and indeed he had behaved so well for such a long time that it could hardly have been grudged to him. It struck me that when he returned from these brief absences he looked a little worried ; but it did not strike me as probable that he had been getting into any fresh straits. It was so evidently incumbent upon him to keep out of them that I suspected him of nothing more heinous than a furtive desire (which he would overcome) to retain his liberty.

“Take it all round, Peter,” he said to me one evening, “this is a pretty rotten sort of world.”

I assented to the general thesis and waited for him to elaborate it ; but he refrained. Only, after a longish pause, he remarked ridiculously that he wished to the deuce he could change places with me ; whereupon I replied that I wished with all my heart he could. Ah, what wouldn’t I have given to be in his place ! But he was dissatisfied, it seemed, and depressed ; though not, I am bound to say, for

more than a quarter of an hour. Bob came in, I remember, and challenged him to a game of billiards, which he won with ease, recovering his customary equanimity after the first few strokes.

That was in September, when Bob and Uncle Charles had come down to help us with the partridges. Bob, who was already beginning to exhibit some of the attributes of a shrewd lawyer, remarked confidentially to me that this project of annexing the Humberston millions was all very well, but that there were aspects of the case which did not seem to him to have received all the consideration that they merited.

"I called on Lady Humberston yesterday," he said, "and she looked to me pretty bad. I tell you plainly that in my opinion the poor old girl is going to make a die of it. Now Sir John, I should say, is game to go on for another twenty years or more, and I don't see what is to prevent his marrying again and having a son—or six sons. Then where's your heiress ? "

I suggested his laying that view of possible future events before my father ; but Bob, like the rest of us, was oddly intimidated by the gentle head of the family and protested that he would never dare to take such a liberty.

"Besides, what would be the use ? In the first place, he would deny the existence of any project, and secondly, even if the engagement

were announced, he wouldn't deign to say a word about settlements. Perhaps I might just warn Arthur, though."

Perhaps he did. If so, I was not informed of results. I did not want to be informed of anything connected with this long-drawn tragedy, the preliminaries of which kept me on the rack for weeks and weeks. It was unquestionably coming ; it announced itself more and more as imminent ; yet it did not come. I was like some unhappy wretch whose head rests on the block while the executioner dallies interminably with the axe. Almost I was tempted to shriek out that it is not fair to torture those appointed to die. But one must not shriek, on the scaffold or elsewhere. The axe always ends by falling, the inevitable always comes to pass, and victims may rest assured that if anybody pities them before they are snuffed out, they and their woes will be forgotten very speedily afterwards.

One afternoon, when Uncle Charles, Bob and I were walking home from shooting, we were met by Arthur, who announced that he had " been and done it this time," adding that we probably shouldn't be surprised to hear of his engagement to Miss Humberston. Uncle Charles, acting as our spokesman, congratulated him upon having won the affections of a very charming young lady ; to which he rather languidly replied :

" Thanks. Yes, she *is* charming, isn't she ? "

He spoke as he might have done if she had been

going to marry somebody else. Presently he observed, with a laugh, that his future father-in-law was a remarkable old freak.

"He told me solemnly that he was all for letting young people follow their own inclinations, that he liked me personally and was pleased with the connection, but that he regretted our having no title. Imagine a man saying such a thing as that! I very nearly suggested that I might get myself made Mayor of Chivenham, and then if he could induce one of the Royalties to come and open the new municipal buildings there would be some chance of my being knighted; but really I was afraid he'd take me at my word."

"Did he say anything upon the subject of settlements?" inquired the practical Bob.

"Rather! Held forth upon the subject for ever so long. But I wasn't listening very much," Arthur confessed, with superb detachment; "I was thinking more of Vi than of him. You know, Vi is really exquisite at times; I could quite understand some fellows going off their heads about her. . . . Hullo, Peter! what's wrong with you?"

"Nothing," I answered. "Why do you ask?"

"You're as white as chalk. You aren't going to faint, are you?"

I said I had a pain inside—which was true—and Bob, promptly diagnosing peritonitis, proposed to

conduct me to the doctor's forthwith; but I declined his thoughtful offer. No doctor has ever discovered a remedy for the complaint from which I was suffering. No remedy exists; not even—so I am half disposed to assert as I write this—the lapse of some seven and twenty long years.

CHAPTER X

THE FINAL TOUCH

IF there is no remedy for certain complaints, there is no sedative for them like despair. When once the worst that can happen has happened, nerves and emotions fall automatically under control, and that, no doubt, is why the bereaved are always reported as "bearing up wonderfully." I bore up as best I might, and, since everybody was much too busy and excited to notice me, I was at least spared the added ordeal of commiseration.

On the day following that of Arthur's announced betrothal I came upon Vi, looking radiantly happy and engaged in affectionate converse with my mother, who also looked happy—as well she might, considering what the acquisition of so splendidly dowered a daughter-in-law must have meant to her. Vi had a friendly and quite self-possessed greeting for me.

"So we're to be brother and sister, Peter," said she. "That will be perfect! Peter and I," she informed my mother explanatorily, "have been sworn allies ever since the day when we first met. I knew at once that he was no ordinary person, and

I'm sure he'll do extraordinary things. Brilliant ones, I mean," she added.

"If he could only get a start," said mother.

"Oh, we must manage that for him," Vi declared.

I looked steadily at her and had the poor satisfaction of seeing her colour ever so slightly. I don't think she meant to be cruel; but I think she did mean to imply that I had no fair grievance and that I had better keep my temper. Perhaps I may boast that I took the hint in a becoming spirit, and perhaps she understood—I hoped she did—that the notion of being beholden to her for possible advancement in life did not precisely allure me.

But I saw little more of her. The wedding was to take place in December, and a move to London was necessitated both by the requirements of the wardrobe and by Lady Humberston's state of health, which called for the best medical advice. Sir John came over once or twice to see my father and to make known his intentions with regard to settlements, which were, I gathered, conceived upon a scale of high munificence. Arthur, who got on well enough with him, thought him a rather amusing old person, and the rest of us did not mind him much, in spite of his patronising airs. My father and mother were eloquently silent concerning him, from which I concluded that they did not like him at all; but then it would hardly have been possible for them, who in many ways belonged to a generation

already defunct, to like him. Sir John Humberston mixed freely with members of the peerage and might himself have been a peer if his Parliamentary seat had been a safer one. He was, to give him his due, boundlessly hospitable and open-handed. He had cheerfully promised “Awthur,” as he called his prospective son-in-law, a week or two of stalking in Scotland, even though he might not be able to act as host.

“Make yourself at home there, my dear boy,” said he, “make yourself at home. My poor wife is in such a wretched state that I’m sure I don’t know about leaving her; but invite your party by all means. Everything shall be ready for you just the same as if I was there.”

When the Humberstons departed for London Arthur went with them, and, as he was to proceed to Scotland shortly, it was understood that we should have him with us as a bachelor no more. After a few days, however, he surprised us by returning, his alleged reason being that he had left any number of things behind and that it was simpler to collect them than to enumerate them by post and have them sent after him. It did not sound to me very like Arthur to undertake so long a journey for so trifling a cause, and the perceptible effort with which he maintained a gay carriage during dinner led me to suspect that adversity of some description had once more overtaken him. This suspicion was confirmed at bedtime, when he hooked his arm into mine and

asked me to come into his room, as he wanted to have a jaw with me.

"Peter," he began, as soon as the door was shut, "I'm in a most ghastly hole."

"Oh, dear!" I sighed, "I thought as much. What is it now? More debts?"

"No," he answered. "At least, not exactly. I shall want money, and a deuce of a lot of it, I'm afraid; but I don't know whether you could describe it as a debt."

"I do hope," said I apprehensively, "that you aren't going to tell me it's a case of blackmail."

He compressed his lips and nodded. "Something horribly near it. Peter, old man, you know what I am. I've never set up to be a saint, but I really don't think anybody could call me a blackguard."

"I should be sorry for anybody who called you that to your face," said I; but my heart sank all the same.

"The worst of it is," he resumed, "that there are circumstances under which one can quite easily be made to look like a blackguard, though in reality one isn't."

I observed that I shouldn't have thought so; to which he rejoined that that was because I was such a queer chap and because I knew nothing of the world.

"Then why come to me for help?" I asked.

He said that was just what he was going to tell me; but, instead of doing so, he wandered off into

desultory irrelevances and had such apparent difficulty in getting under way that at length I endeavoured to bring him to the point by saying :

“ It’s some trouble about a woman, I suppose.”

“ Oh, of course,” he answered ; “ only, coming just now, it’s rather particularly awkward, not to say calamitous, for me. In fact, if you can’t get me out of this, I’m about done. You may remember a girl called Dulcie Wynne who had a dancing part at the *Ambiguity* last winter ? Her real name is Harriet Lintern and her father is a coal merchant in a smallish way.”

I did vaguely recall the young woman and thought it likely enough that she might have claims upon Arthur ; but it was an unpleasant surprise to me to learn that she possessed what is universally conceded to be the strongest claim that a woman can possess upon a man. This was indeed awkward and, when baldly stated, sounded pretty discreditable into the bargain ; yet I could believe that Arthur was not so culpable as he was in danger of being pronounced. For, according to him, Miss Dulcie Wynne could by no means boast of an unblemished past, nor would it be at all fair to accuse him of having been the ruin of her. Such, however, was the accusation resolutely formulated by Mr. Lintern, who had sworn that he would stand no nonsense and who, to put the case shortly, demanded ample pecuniary compensation as the sole alternative to exposure,

"How much does he want?" I asked.

"Ten thousand," was Arthur's laconic reply.

"Ten thousand pounds!" I echoed, aghast.

"Oh, but that's impossible!"

"So I've told him until I'm sick of telling him; it's waste of breath talking to such an obstinate old devil. He simply won't believe that we aren't rich people; he says we must be. Anyhow, he's sure that it's worth ten thousand pounds of our money to hush up a scandal, and he won't take a penny less. You see, there's a man named Cawston who is willing to marry her—upon terms; only, as you can understand, there isn't a great deal of time to be lost; so they've been pressing me pretty hard these last few weeks."

"Mr. Cawston," I observed, "must be an estimable sort of person."

"I don't know, I'm sure. They call him a very respectable man."

"He doesn't enjoy my respect," said I.

"Oh, well, I daresay he's hard up, and Harriet is an awfully nice girl. At any rate, that's their affair. The tragic thing for me is that when I looked the old man up yesterday he said he had had enough of shilly-shallying and he was going to write to the governor. You may bet your life that he'll do it too."

I stared at Arthur in dumb consternation. Could he, I wondered, have taken in the full extent of this calamity? That my father would make great

sacrifices to avert a public scandal was not unlikely, though I doubted his ability to raise ten thousand pounds ; but what seemed to me beyond all doubt was that he would consider it his plain duty to acquaint the Humberstons with the facts. Something of this I said to my brother, who assented.

"Oh yes, there'll be a high old rumpus. I suppose it will mean the breaking off of my engagement, for one thing."

Yet, with this knock-down blow threatening him, he had been calmly making arrangements for the slaughter of Sir John's stags ! I hardly knew whether to admire his nonchalance or to be exasperated by his insensibility.

"Well," I said despairingly, "there's nothing to be done now that I can see. Why you should consult me I can't think."

Arthur, who had been seated on the edge of his bed, swinging one leg, now rose and put an arm round my shoulder.

"Dear old Peter," said he, "I'm afraid I'm going to annoy you, but upon my word and honour my only idea when I did it was to prevent her from annoying me by turning up at Hounslow—a thing of which she was capable in her excited moments."

"When you did what ?" I asked, with no foreboding of what I was to hear.

"When I gave her your name, instead of my own.

To this day the Linters are under the impression that I'm Peter Vaux, and it's possible—I know I haven't the smallest right to ask it of you, still it *is* possible—for them to remain under that impression."

Probably everyone who reads this will think that the cool impudence of such a suggestion borders upon the incredible; probably that is what I myself should think, were I to hear or read of a similar case. But Arthur . . . how can I explain why Arthur was always pardonable, always irresistible? I believe I did begin by telling him to go and be hanged; yet I really could not wish to ruin his life. Moreover (as he did not fail to point out) the circumstances gave powerful support to his appeal. Should the truth be divulged, his marriage and the reviving fortunes of the family would alike suffer shipwreck; Vi would be humiliated and made miserable; the whole county would ring with the story of our discomfiture. On the other hand, my shouldering of the burden would entail nothing worse than a certain amount of domestic obloquy. There would be a row, to be sure; but the affair would be kept dark and the money would be raised somehow.

"And mind you," Arthur concluded, "I don't see why I shouldn't repay the governor by instalments. As far as I can make out, I shall have the means, and I should think he wouldn't mind taking it from me. I could tell him that I felt it was

awfully hard lines upon him to have had to stump up for you and—and all that, you know."

"Your generously defraying the cost of the iniquities which I haven't committed would supply the final artistic touch," I remarked.

Arthur implored me not to be sarcastic. He fully acknowledged that I was entitled to be that or anything else I liked ; but what was the use ? He was at my mercy ; if I didn't see my way to save him I had only to say so.

Well, I did not say so. It had become plain to me that, for good or for ill, I was not going to say so. What I did say that I could hardly see my way to do was to keep up a fiction which was liable to be exploded at any moment. I might be confronted with Mr. Lintern or his daughter ; for that matter, either of them might recognise the portrait of Miss Humberston's betrothed in one of the illustrated papers, and then where should we be ? But Arthur said one must take some risks. He did not believe that the risks would be many or serious.

"What they are after is the money. Once they have pouched that, we shall hear no more of them, you may depend upon it."

Where the money was to come from was a question which scarcely troubled him, I think, and he made little of my rather strong objection to telling unlimited lies. The odds were that I should have to say next to nothing, he remarked. I should be

charged with having done this thing and I should not repudiate the charge, that would be all.

" Dear old chap, it's atrocious of me to land you in such a hole ; but you see I'm not studying my own interests alone."

Nor was I. His interests, as a question between the two of us, might have been allowed to go by the board ; but Vi, who loved him, had to be considered, as well as my own people. Yet I won't say that I was quite as nobly altruistic as I am making myself sound. The truth, I suppose, is that I was like a man who, knowing himself to be moribund, is told that he must undergo a severe operation. He consents, because it is not worth while to make a fuss ; he faces with fortitude a prospect which might have daunted him if he had been in good health, because he really does not care. I was already so unhappy that one added misfortune could hardly make me more so. And here I should like to put in a word for poor Arthur, whom I have been forced to exhibit as cutting so unhandsome a figure. He did not, I am sure, think that he was letting me in for anything more terrible than a bad quarter of an hour. The offence which he was transferring to me was not, in his eyes, a very heinous one, and he would doubtless have been ready enough to take the consequences of it in an ordinary way. It was because matters stood as they did that he had been constrained to seek my aid, and I daresay he wondered what made me laugh when he remarked that

it was "rare luck" his having thought of appropriating my name.

"Providential," I agreed—and so wished him good-night.

I suspect that both Arthur and I—at any rate, I can speak for myself—put in an appearance at the breakfast table, the next morning, with beating hearts. But it was at once evident from my father's voice and manner that Mr. Lintern had not yet fired his shot, and before the second post arrived Arthur was well on his way back to London. When, after luncheon, my father asked me to come into his study, I drew in my breath and braced myself to play a part for which I was conscious of possessing scant aptitude. Unnecessarily, however; for all he had to say was that, although he did not wish to hurry me, he thought I ought to be forming some definite plan for the future. Had I anything in my mind beyond the rather doubtful chance of becoming somebody's secretary?

Twenty-four hours earlier I should have had to reply in the negative; but the night watches had brought me counsel in a form which enabled me to say without hesitation that I should like to emigrate to Australia.

My father raised his eyebrows. "To emigrate? Do you think you are cut out for the kind of life that that implies?"

At least as well as for a city life, I answered. I knew a little—not very much perhaps, still a little—

about agriculture and I had always loved the open air. For the rest, I was strong and had no fear of manual labour.

“I am a little doubtful about your strength, Peter,” said my father, “and still more doubtful about your knowing your own mind. This plan would mean practically permanent exile, remember.”

I did not tell him that that was its chief recommendation—he would soon be forced to agree with me there, alas!—but I dwelt with so much vigour upon my longing for a Colonial career that he ended by promising to consider the question. He said :

“From all that I have heard, a young man who goes out to Australia, or indeed to any of the Colonies, has small chance of doing more than just paying his way, unless he starts with some capital. Now if I am to provide you with the requisite capital, I must, I am afraid, in fairness to your brothers and sisters, deduct that sum from the amount which I had proposed that you should inherit at my death.”

He was playing into my hands with a readiness which I had not dared to expect. I took courage to say that I should like to have the whole of my younger son’s portion at once, if that could be managed.

“Well,” answered my father, smiling, “it so happens that I could just now easily manage to do as

you ask ; because I had to-day an offer for some china-clay land of mine which I considered a good one. The land was bought by me a good many years ago ; so I am entitled to sell it, and of course if your share were to be defrayed out of the proceeds, the estate would not suffer in any way. The sum for which you are down in my will is, I may tell you, ten thousand pounds. I am sorry it can't be more, but I am not as well off as I was."

He was going to be much worse off, in a sense other than pecuniary. Well I knew that, with his notions of ethics, he would feel so ; but that could not be helped. For myself, I felt that I was infinitely better off than I had had any business to anticipate. The ten thousand, anyhow, would be forthcoming, and the estate, as my father had said, would not suffer at all. I paid little heed to further words of kindly advice, since they had not, naturally, much bearing upon the actual case.

" You would do well," my father concluded, " to consult your Uncle Charles, who is more a man of the world and a far better man of business than I. I shall not oppose you, provided you can convince me that you understand what you are about ; nevertheless, my dear boy, I should like you to bear in mind that it will be a sore trial to us all to part with you."

I daresay my stammering response to a speech which would have touched me a day earlier sounded

surly and thankless enough ; but what could I say ?
The one redeeming feature in the trial which awaited him was that it would soon be followed by my departure.

CHAPTER XI

THE BURSTING OF THE STORM

WHEN mother heard of the emigration project, she was more distressed than I had ever thought that she would be. With tears in her eyes, she asked me whether I had realised that, if carried out, it would entail lifelong severance from home, and when I answered—a little shortly, perhaps—that I knew that, but that there was no help for it, she sat sorrowfully silent awhile.

Then she wondered whether I had any special reason for wishing to take this step ; to which I thought it as well to reply that I had several reasons for wishing to leave England.

She looked at me inquiringly. “ It’s such a waste of you ! ” she sighed.

I daresay she had formed plans and dreamed dreams upon the strength of my having taken honours at Oxford ; she certainly did not think that I could all of a sudden have become imbued with a craze for sheep-farming. But I was obliged to repel her efforts at discovering what ailed me. Cicely could give a shrewd guess ; though of course it was not an entirely accurate one.

"Peter dear," she found an opportunity of asking me, "must we all be punished for what isn't really anybody's fault? I quite see your point of view, and I don't wonder at it. You would like to get away from old associations and make a fresh start. That's the sort of feeling that we all have when we have been disappointed, and everybody has disappointments, you know. But fresh starts can be made just as well after sitting still for a little as after rushing about."

"I don't deny that the loss of the secretaryship was a disappointment," said I, being determined to misunderstand her; "all the same, it isn't on account of that or any other disappointment that I'm going to Australia. I'm going because I want to go, and there's nothing else to be said about it."

Ere long there would, of course, be a good deal more to be said about it, though possibly not by me. In the meantime I could only wait for the imminent storm to burst. It burst the next morning—if such language can be fitly applied to a disturbance which announced itself so tranquilly. When I joined the breakfast party, my father was reading his letters, of which he always had a good many. He looked up for an instant to wish me good morning, displaying neither anger nor perturbation; but, for all that, I perceived by his pallor and the set of his lips that Mr. Lintern's missive had reached him. I myself may have been rather pale; for both my mother and Uncle Charles asked if I was all right. It had been

decided on the previous evening that I was to go out shooting with Uncle Charles and Bob ; but there did not now seem to be much likelihood of my being allowed to do that. I sat pretending to eat and wondering what the grave, silent figure at the head of the table had in store for me. He did not turn his eyes in my direction after he had done with his correspondence, and if I shot a few furtive glances at him, I learned nothing from them. I was prepared for a request to stay where I was when we all got up and made for the door ; but it was my uncle who was asked to remain.

“Can you spare me five minutes, Charles ? I should like to take your opinion about something.”

This, so far as it went, partook of the nature of a respite. Uncle Charles’s opinion with regard to amatory entanglements would not, it might be conjectured, err on the side of severity, and he would quite probably urge extenuations on my behalf which I should have neither the courage nor the skill to plead for myself. I went into the gun-room with Bob, who began to get impatient when the stipulated five minutes had lengthened themselves into twenty. He said there was a time for everything, and this was the time to shoot. The proper time for discussing business was the evening.

“Not if you’ve got to catch the afternoon post,” I gloomily observed.

“Oh, but I don’t suppose he has. Ten to one he only wants to consult Uncle Charles about this

Australian fad of yours—in which I don't much believe, mind you. You've got it in you to be all manner of funny things, Peter, but I'm dashed if I see you as a squatter or a bushranger."

"One may take up one's abode in Australia without being either," I remarked. "As a matter of fact, I don't think there are any bushrangers now."

We had to talk about something ; so we talked about a subject of which we were both spacially ignorant until at last Uncle Charles tramped in, reddish in the face and visibly upset. It was only too evident that he did not regard the affair lightly, and my heart sank when he said, with unwonted brusquerie :

"You're wanted in your father's room, Peter ; we shall have to go out without you to-day."

I made no answer, drew a long breath and stepped forth to receive sentence. It was reminiscent of the dread behest to "stay after twelve" at Eton, only much, much worse ; for my father, without meaning it or being aware of it (at least, I am almost sure that he was not aware of it), was far more terrible than the sternest of head-masters armed with the most vicious of birch-rods. When I entered his presence, looking, I have no doubt, like a peculiarly mean criminal, he was seated at his writing-table, and he began at once, in a quiet, level voice :

"I have heard from a man who signs himself John

Lintern, and I presume from what he says that you knew of his intention to write to me."

I made a gesture of assent.

"That being so, I need not, perhaps, tell you the purport of his letter."

"He makes demands, I suppose," said I, with a dry throat and, of course, a stuttering tongue.

"He makes demands—yes. That is of secondary importance."

My father was silent for a long minute. Then he looked up at me and said : "Peter, this is a shameful story. I don't speak of the immorality of it. My religious convictions, as you know, forbid me to condone what is commonly condoned ; still I know the temptations to which you would naturally be exposed, and indeed I hardly see why, without religious convictions, you should try to resist them. Nevertheless, a man need not cease to be a gentleman because he has ceased to be a Christian, and the betrayal of an innocent girl is an act of which no gentleman or honourable man would be guilty."

I plucked up spirit enough to say : "It isn't quite so bad as that, sir."

"How not so bad ?" he asked, fixing me with those grave eyes of his under which I invariably quailed.

I managed, with difficulty, to intimate that, if it came to innocence, Miss Dulcie Wynne was scarcely a shining exponent of that virtue ; but I was

awkward and confused and probably did not sound convincing.

" You are making it worse," he said coldly. " No excuse that you could put forward would make it any better, I am afraid ; but I wish you had not attempted such a sorry one as blackening a character which has been lost through you. Peter, I don't want to judge you more harshly than I can help ; I don't want to preach at you more than I can help. I must, however, do my duty, and so must you do yours. When a man has wronged a woman as you have wronged this poor girl, there is one reparation, and only one, which he has it in his power to make. You must marry her."

Here was a pretty complication ! Never had it crossed my mind that anything so grotesque could happen ; yet if I had reflected upon what my father was, I might well have foreseen it. All my life long I have been plagued with a sense of the ludicrous which is apt to overpower me at the most unseasonable moments, and no doubt it was this, coupled with nervous tension, that caused me to break out into an abrupt laugh. My father looked astonished and distressed. He said :

" I am sorry that you should make a joke of what, by my way of thinking, is a very serious matter."

" But really it's out of the question, sir," I protested.

" Your saying so," he returned, " does not make it so. What I consider out of the question is that

you should refuse to do your indisputable duty. You need not trouble to specify objections. I am perfectly alive to them, and I don't for a moment pretend that your mother and I shall not feel humiliated by such a connection. Of course we shall, and of course we shall dislike it. That, however, is nothing to the point."

In vain did I represent that the Linterns themselves had not thought of what he contemplated, that they only demanded money, and that this, luckily, could be supplied by my patrimony, every penny of which I was ready to forego. He said that their willingness to accept something less than their due could not absolve me from the obligation to pay them in full.

"As for direct pecuniary payment, there need not be any question of that. Your wish to go out to Australia is now explained, and it may be that you will do well to adhere to that plan. There will perhaps be a better chance for you and your wife in a new country than here."

What on earth was I to do ? Obviously we were getting within measurable distance of a complete and irreparable disclosure. As a last resource, I inquired :

"Does Uncle Charles think that I ought to marry the girl ? "

"Well, no," answered my father ; "since you ask me, he does not take that view. But he does think that you have behaved unlike a gentleman. If

you count upon him to support you, you will be disappointed."

"I don't count upon him for anything except common sense," I cried, being in such a desperate strait and feeling wholly incapable of coping with my father. "Will you at least let me talk it over with him before you commit yourself or me?"

"I must answer Mr. Lintern," said my father inflexibly.

"Yes, but you needn't say more than that you have received his letter, that you are giving it full consideration and that he shall hear from you again in a day or two. I am sure that will satisfy him."

To this my father assented, after a moment of meditation, warning me at the same time that his conceptions of right and wrong were not to be modified by Uncle Charles or anybody else.

"Evidently you do not wish to marry this unfortunate young woman, and I cannot, it is true, compel you to do so. I shall, nevertheless, feel bound to bring all the pressure in my power to bear upon you, and, disagreeable as it is to me to say this, I must remind you that you are dependent upon me for means of subsistence."

I was thankful to get out of the room. I might, of course, have done much better for myself; I might, for instance, have adduced the strangely accommodating Cawston as evidence that the sacrifice required of me was superfluous. But the ignominious truth is that I was scared. Lying has

never been one of my gifts or accomplishments, and under that searching gaze of my father's, insincerity withered. I really think that if I had started to excuse what at first sight seemed so inexcusable, I should soon have revealed, by some idiotic blunder or other, the fact that I was not guilty at all. I only felt safe so long as I held my tongue.

With Uncle Charles it would be another affair. Whatever might be his opinion of me, he would certainly agree that marriage as a solution was not to be thought of, and very likely he would consent to make representations to my father concerning Miss Lintern which would come better from him than from me. I wandered off to the woods, where I spent the whole day, taking care to avoid the shooters, whom I could hear popping away in the distance, and only emerging at sundown, when I intercepted them on their way home. Uncle Charles was very short and grumpy with me, but did not refuse me an audience after Bob had gone up to the kennels.

"Well, you know, Peter," he began, "this is a nasty business. It just shows what I always maintain, that one's safer with young fellows who are a bit wild at starting, like Arthur, than with you sober-sided beggars who look as if butter wouldn't melt in your mouths. Where did you pick the girl up?"

"I—I couldn't tell you," I faltered; for indeed I couldn't.

"H'm ! I should have thought you might have remembered that much. Daughter of some small tradesman, isn't she ? "

"Her father is a coal merchant," I answered. "She herself is an actress, and her stage name is Dulcie Wynne."

Uncle Charles whistled. "The deuce it is ! I know something of Miss Dulcie Wynne. Oh, not personally," he made haste to add, "not personally ; but one hears things. Peter, are you sure that all this isn't a plant ? "

I was as sure as my brother's statements could make me, and I thought it highly improbable that Arthur had been the victim of a plant ; but I had to walk warily, for I realised that I had not taken nearly enough trouble to get myself coached. More than once in the course of the dialogue that followed I was embarrassed by inquiries to which I could give no reply ; so that, although Uncle Charles was no longer disposed to judge me severely, he became rather impatient of what he called my "confounded equivocations." Such information as he got from me sufficed, however, to convince him that the Linterns had a genuine claim, and he accepted without incredulity the existence of the amazing Cawston. He declared (I cannot think accurately) that there were any number of Cawstons about. Ten thousand pounds was excessive, though ; it ought not to be difficult to effect a reduction in that figure.

"Have you told all this to your father?" he ended by asking.

I confessed that I had not. "His one idea is that I must marry Miss Lintern and make an honest woman of her," I said.

"Oh yes, I know," answered Uncle Charles, laughing. "Poor old Ralph! Well, one may smile, but there's something rather fine about him all the same. There's nothing very fine about you, my boy, to speak frankly; though it's only fair to say that you've had worse luck than you deserved, and I don't mind acknowledging that I was in too great a hurry to condemn you. Dulcie Wynne is—"

"I tried to tell him what she is," I interrupted, "and he said I was only making things worse."

"So now you want me to tell him, eh? Right you are; I've no objection—far from it! Even Ralph can't insist upon your marrying the lady; only I'm afraid, when all's said and done, it will be a case of having to pay up."

"I can do that," I observed. "It was agreed that I was to be given my younger son's portion of ten thousand pounds to start me in Australia."

"So I understood from Ralph. Then you propose to start for Australia without a penny in your pocket, do you?"

He did not, I fear, believe me when I declared that my passage money was all I should want. I fear also that I sank yet lower in his esteem by

declining to accompany him to London and interview the Lintern family, which was the next step that he proposed to take. It was, of course, impossible for me to do that ; but, as I could give no colourable reason for its being impossible, I had to bow to Uncle Charles's conclusion of :

" In other words, you funk it. As you please ; your presence isn't indispensable. But I wish you would face things like a man, and I wish you were a bit more straightforward, Peter. It has taken me a long time to worm all this out of you, and Lord knows whether I've got at the whole truth yet ! "

Lord knew he hadn't ! He had gone about as near as his kindly nature would allow him to calling me a liar and a coward ; yet I could not feel much resentment. The former I unquestionably was, and if it is cowardly to be afraid, I must have pleaded guilty to the latter indictment also. I had, it was true, a good deal to be afraid of. I did not half like his projected visit to the Linterns, which might so easily, through some chance word or other, bring him fatal enlightenment ; yet I dared not oppose it, lest Mr. Lintern should be requested to come down to Chivenham, which would be very much worse. I likewise dreaded my father's attitude, knowing, as I did, that he would never dream of taking any action which went against his conscience and that it would be quite in his manner to repudiate Uncle Charles's description of Miss Dulcie as an interested and scandalous fabrication.

Upon this point, however, I was soon reassured. Before dinner my uncle was able to inform me that he was to leave for London on the morrow in the character of a delegate, armed with full powers.

“Your father is good enough to say that I’m better qualified for negotiations of this sort than he is, and without vanity I believe I am. Anyhow, he was a good deal comforted by what I told him. It’s a mess and a nuisance ; but it isn’t the hopeless, discreditable mess that he thought it was.”

That was a dismal evening. Everybody knew that I had “done something” ; but neither my father nor Uncle Charles divulged what it was, and naturally I did not. I foresaw that when the truth did come out, I should find myself very definitely, very permanently alone. Sympathy I could not expect ; pity I did not want ; exile alone seemed to call me with a certain stern, sour amity. And unless Uncle Charles could induce Mr. Lintern to lower his terms, exile itself might prove impracticable !

CHAPTER XII

SOME FURTHER TRIALS

ON the ensuing morning I escorted Uncle Charles to the railway station—partly because I wanted an excuse to get out of the house, partly because I was anxious to impress upon him that it would be needless to enter into any discussion of the past with Mr. Lintern. All he had to do, or could do, was to make a bid, which would probably be unsuccessful, for a reduced ransom. My uncle did not take my admonitions in very good part. He answered briefly that he knew what he was about ; otherwise he would not have undertaken a rather disagreeable mission. So it was not without misgivings that I saw the last of him. He was going to tread on thin ice ; but I had said as much by way of warning as I dared.

All that long day I loafed about the streets of Chivenham, wishing myself anywhere else upon the earth's surface, except at home. I lunched at the County Club and of course saw many people, every one of whom had some remarks, congratulatory or inquisitive, to make upon the subject of Arthur's engagement. I daresay it was pretty widely known

that our circumstances were not what they had been and that this marriage promised to set us at our ease again. My interrogators must have thought me a surly dog. Some of them went so far as to conjecture jocularly that my nose was out of joint ; for my devotion to the heiress had not escaped notice. Well, I had only myself to thank for courting such encounters.

I had to face an even less welcome one on the homeward road towards sunset. If there was a person whom I particularly did not wish to meet, it was Mr. Rimmington ; but avoid him I could not. He had caught sight of me as he came down the lime avenue, with those short, quick steps which, for some reason or other, are affected by clerics of all denominations, and I was perforce his captive. I guessed that he had been with my father and that he had been told what my father would feel moved to confide to his parish priest. I was not mistaken there ; but I was hardly prepared for the kindness, affection and sympathy with which the good man accosted me. He said at once that he had heard of the sad trouble in which I was involved, adding, however, that he was sure he had not heard the whole of it—sure that I was “keeping something back.”

“ Your father thinks you reticent and secretive. Well, I know that is your nature, and we can’t help our natures. I must not say that we can’t help falling into sin, though it is very certain that we are

all sinners ; but I do say that any sin will be forgiven, fully and finally, if it be repented of. Repent we must ; that is imperative ; but there are other things to be thought of as well. It seems to me that you have been willing to appear more culpable than you really are, and I am afraid you are in a fair way to lay up needless unhappiness for yourself and others. I can enter into your feeling, I think, though I am convinced that it is an altogether wrong one. A man is too proud to say what he might in his own defence, because he considers that it ought to be taken for granted by those who know him and care for him. Perhaps it ought ; but it very seldom is. Believe me, my dear fellow, it is always a mistake, and sometimes a fatal one, to harden your heart.”

He said a good deal more which I need not quote. His words touched me in much the same manner as his sermons had touched me of yore. He was a warm-hearted, generous soul, full of compassion for human frailties and comprehension of them. In matters concerning faith he was apt to be dogmatic and querulous ; but for sinners he had nothing but the tenderest solicitude, deeming that he stood—as indeed I suppose he did—in the same relation to them as a doctor to the sick. Unfortunately, his remedies were not applicable to my case. In confession he had great confidence, and he implored me to resort to it with such gentleness, such fervour and, incidentally, with such a much more intimate

knowledge of my character than I had imagined him to possess that I only wished I could yield to his importunity. That being out of my power, there was no choice for me but to show a renitent front. He alarmed me a little by repeating that he did not believe the whole story had been told, that I had represented myself as behaving in a way which did not accord with my temperament and habits, and so forth. I felt that it would never do to let him go on like that ; so I had to be curt and hard with him. I had to be rather hard upon myself too, for it went against the grain with me to speak as I did ; but he was wonderfully patient. Only when, as a last defensive measure, I disclaimed contrition did he begin to falter.

" But you *must* be sorry, Peter," he remonstrated. " Don't tell me that you are not sorry ; I can't believe that."

" I am sorry that the thing has happened," I answered ; " I am sorry about the expense and the annoyance to my father. But I don't really regret anything that I myself have done."

I could say that truly, and if it sounded a brazen assertion, it had the effect that it was meant to have ; for poor Mr. Rimmington was put to silence. I shall never forget the wistful look in his sunken eyes as he bade me good-bye and said he would pray for me. I am sure he kept his promise. He was going away for a time, he said, having undertaken to conduct a mission somewhere or

other. I watched him while he hurried down the drive in the waning light beneath the yellow trees, his head bent forward and his hands clasped behind his back. From time to time he stumbled, as elderly men do when their thoughts are wandering. I never saw him again. He was very good to me. Sometimes, as in the instance of that religious disputation with my uncle, he had irritated and disappointed me ; yet I loved him, and although it doesn't matter—although towards the end of life one must needs perceive how little anything matters—I wish he could have known that before he died.

My next ordeal was the quite unavoidable one (though I had absurdly endeavoured to avoid it) of a talk with mother. It was not rendered lighter for me by her avowed incredulity with regard to the circumstances. She was just as firmly convinced as Mr. Rimmington that I was “keeping something back” ; she besought me to confide in her, and it was not surprising that she should be hurt by my obstinate asseverations that I had nothing beyond what she had heard already to confide. It made her no happier to be told that all expenses would be defrayed by me. She was not, for the moment, troubling herself about finance, nor even about my impending departure for the other side of the globe. What wounded her was that she was held at arm's length—she, whose love for her children had never before been requited after that fashion and who may well have deemed that she had not deserved such

treatment. I longed to give her a hint that I was not as callous as I appeared to be ; but I could not risk any sort of admission. My one safeguard, I felt, lay in the morose taciturnity which at length proved too much even for her forbearance and sweet temper. So I had a bad time.

I could not, to be sure, reasonably expect a good one. The limits of all reasonable expectation were exceeded that evening, when my father made me an apology. He said that he wished I had given him an earlier opportunity of acknowledging that in one important particular he had condemned me unjustly.

“ If you had told me what you told your uncle, I should not have said what it seemed to me that I must say.”

“ I did try, sir,” I reminded him ; “ but you refused to listen to me.”

He frowned and looked distressed. “ Did I ? Yes, I believe I did. Then I acted wrongly and I ask your pardon, Peter. It would be absurd to pretend that there is not a great difference between such a *liaison* as I now understand existed between you and this young actress and the conduct of which you were accused by her father. If your uncle is able to confirm the story that he had from you, and if this man Lintern, who may, for anything I know, be a rascal, does not ask or wish for a marriage, you are, of course, to that extent exonerated.”

“ I am sure he doesn’t wish for anything except damages,” I said, and had thoughts of mentioning

Cawston, since Uncle Charles had apparently said nothing about him. But I decided to leave that alone. My father would scarcely have given credence to a statement of the kind and might have imputed it to me for added iniquity.

"I shall be very anxious for news from Charles," he sighed presently.

So was I. The ease with which my uncle might find out too much was very present to my mind, and I was inclined to accuse myself of having been an unpardonable fool in letting him go. Yet I did not see how I could have stopped him without incurring even more formidable risks. But my father and I obtained relief sooner than we could have hoped. It came telegraphically soon after breakfast the next morning and sounded quite satisfactory.

"Affair arranged. Coming down by afternoon express," was Uncle Charles's message, for which I thanked my stars.

I drove a dogcart to the station to meet him; but he tossed his kit-bag into it, saying that he would rather walk if it was all the same to me; and I willingly acquiesced, as I was eager for his report, which could not very well be given in the groom's hearing. He did not seem particularly eager to furnish me with it, nor was his grave, worried face much like that of a successful negotiator. He had, nevertheless, been completely successful.

"Oh yes, it's all right," he told me. "I've got

everything in black and white, barring the receipt for the money, which Lintern will forward as soon as he is paid. Five thousand is the figure ; I beat him down to that after a good deal of disputing and haggling."

To me this was indeed good news, since it meant that I could take ship for Australia without costing anybody a farthing, and I thanked my capable uncle with a warmth which he did not appear to appreciate.

" You're mighty keen about shelling out five thousand pounds," he grumbled.

I observed that that would be a good deal pleasanter than shelling out ten ; to which he assented, adding that he supposed he might take some credit to himself for firmness.

" Because it was really a game of bluff, and if they had chosen to stick out, they could have beaten me. Their trump card, of course, was the threat of a public scandal, which we aren't prepared to face. Against that, I happened to be acquainted with sundry episodes of Miss Dulcie's past. Scarcely a trump card ; still I made the most of it, and it told with old Lintern."

" What was he like ? " I inadvertently and idiotically asked.

" That's a queer question," returned Uncle Charles, " considering how familiar you are with him."

" I was only wondering how he struck you," I made haste to explain.

"He struck me as a decent, contemptible lower-middle-class citizen. I should think by the look of him that he goes to church every Sunday, sells short weight to his customers and has the sort of self-respect that arises from a blessed ignorance of self. When I told him that he would do well to take five thousand if he wanted to get anything more than the magistrates would grant, he began to whimper and declared that he wasn't free to make any bargain without consulting Mr. Cawston. So then Cawston had to be fetched from the public-house or wherever he was."

There seemed to be no harm in my asking what Cawston was like, and I therefore made that inquiry.

"Cawston? Oh, a good-looking, greasy-haired, dandified, threadbare sort of a—of a damned skunk. Calls himself a journalist and dramatist. I found him a rather tougher nut to crack than old Lintern; still, as it was evident that he'd sell his soul—if he has one, which I doubt—for five thousand pounds, I managed to wear him down by degrees. I don't know when I've come across a more nauseous fellow."

"It's rough upon his future wife," I could not help saying.

"Why, no; the queer thing is that she adores him. She told me that he was her first love, that she had never really cared for anybody else, and a lot more to the same effect. All of which has been

found compatible with—you know what! Who can pretend to understand women? She says it's magnificent of him to take her."

"One can only be glad that she should think so," I observed.

"H'm! I've got a hard old heart and she's nothing to me. All the same, I can assure you that the transaction made me feel sick. Not that I could help it, of course. I was there to make the best bargain I could for my own side, and she wants to marry that swine, and it's very certain that he wouldn't marry her unless the money was all right. Miss Dulcie Wynne," my uncle continued, after we had walked some little way in silence, "is out and out the best of that squalid crowd. She spoke quite civilly of you, you'll be pleased to hear."

"Oh, did she?" said I.

"Yes, and she showed me a photograph of yourself with which you had presented her. I thought it had better not remain in her possession, and she didn't seem to mind parting with it. It isn't a very good likeness, Peter."

My heart turned cold as he produced from his pocket and held up for my inspection what certainly was not a good likeness of me, but was an excellent one of Arthur. So the catastrophe which had palpably threatened to occur had occurred after all! It seemed strange that he should only now mention it, especially as his face showed that he felt the disclosure to be no less catastrophic than I did. I

did not attempt vain evasions, but asked apprehensively :

“ You didn’t say anything to her, did you ? ”

“ No, Peter,” answered my uncle, “ I didn’t say anything to her—or to anybody else either. I thought I had better see you first.”

“ And you won’t say anything ? ” I pleaded.

“ I don’t know so much about that. Perhaps you’ll explain. I’m afraid the thing explains itself ; but if you can make it look at all less infamous on Arthur’s part I shall be obliged to you.”

I had no alternative but to tell him the whole truth. It would have been impossible, I think, to relate such a tale without seeming to exalt myself at Arthur’s expense, and I have little dexterity. Uncle Charles, consequently, was roused to a high pitch of indignation. He said it was the most disgraceful thing he had ever heard of in all his life, adding that if I thought he was going to be made a party to it, I little knew him.

“ That means that you will enlighten father,” I remarked.

He nodded. “ Just so, my boy ; I shall enlighten your father.”

“ Then,” said I, “ you might as well publish everything in the *Chivenham Chronicle* at once. Most men, no doubt, would think that the family dirty linen had better be washed in the family circle ; but you know as well as I do that he won’t. He will consider himself bound in honour to inform the

Humberstons, and I know, if you don't, that then Miss Humberston will break off her engagement."

"Can't help that," said Uncle Charles.

"But it can be helped and it must," I protested.

I made little headway with him by dwelling upon the pecuniary sacrifice which would fall so heavily upon us all, nor could I prevail upon him to admit that the case was an involved one. He said it was perfectly simple and infernally ugly. In vain did I assure him that he would serve me no good turn by exposing me.

"That's rubbish," he answered. "I see well enough that my holding my tongue would be convenient to various people; but I'll be shot if I see how I can be doing you a service by letting you slink out of the country under a cloud, after chucking away the half of your small capital. Moreover, Peter, you're asking me—perhaps you don't realise that—to do a dirty and dishonourable thing. I can't and I won't! So that's flat."

Nevertheless, he did at length give in. He had to be taken into my inmost confidence (which I did not much like); he had to hear of my hopeless passion for Vi; he had to be persuaded that nothing could be more preposterous than his notion of her accepting me in the place of the diminished Arthur; it had to be brought home to him by dint of such eloquence as my strait wrung from me that I honestly and unaffectedly preferred obloquy to the wreck of her happiness. We walked about the park

for a good hour while I harangued him, and it was only with the utmost reluctance that he capitulated.

"All I can say," he gloomily concluded, "is that you've convinced me of your sincerity. I don't believe you're right, though, and I don't believe I am. Well, I'll have my talk with Ralph to-night, and to-morrow morning I shall be off. I can't stay in this house, and I'm not going to put in an appearance at Arthur's wedding either. Peter, you villain, it will be no thanks to you if I'm ever able to hold up my head again. I daresay you're a splendid fellow—in fact, I know you are—but you've made a worm of poor old me!"

CHAPTER XIII

MY PARTING BOW

TRUE to his word, Uncle Charles left us the next day. He had recently retired from the command of his battalion, so that his time was his own, and he proposed, he said, to join some friends in the Highlands who wanted another gun. After he had gone, my father became—I won’t say kinder to me, for he had never been anything else than kind—but more sympathising and less sorrowfully condemnatory. He could not but be relieved by the turn that matters had taken, and if he was horrified at what he considered the unblushing depravity of the Lintern family, one and all, he not unnaturally saw in it some palliation of my offence. He would have liked me, perhaps, to plead that I had been “led away”; but how was I to plead that or anything else? It really would not have been safe; for I am a wretched bad actor and the manifold risks of giving myself away had been emphasised for me by what had occurred in the case of Uncle Charles. So I entrenched myself behind a taciturnity which must have had all the appearance of cross-grained impenitence.

"I won't attempt to dissuade you from going to Australia, Peter," my father said ; "I can see that, on more accounts than one, you had better carry out your plan—at all events for a time. Only I must stipulate that this payment of five thousand pounds shall not come out of your pocket. You are entitled to a fair start, and although the money has to be paid, I do not honestly feel that, under the circumstances, it is due from you."

To this, however, I would not agree. I hardly know why I was so obstinate about it, but I had determined in my own mind that he should not be a loser by my supposed transgressions, and I can't deny that I am in some respects a stubborn person. That foolish prefix of "proud" worked, no doubt, to my detriment in this instance, as in others. My dear mother, who found me—who could not help finding me—intractable, may have held it to blame for a demeanour which hurt her and which hurt me too, God knows ! I wish now that I had not behaved like that. It was not in reality necessary to be so bearish ; my purpose would have been equally well served, I daresay, by a simple intimation that I did not wish to talk about a subject which nobody, in all probability, was anxious to discuss. I can only say that I was nervous and that my mother in particular intimidated me, because of her knowledge of my nature and of her manifest concurrence in Mr. Rimmington's surmise that I was concealing something.

She was, I fear, more distressed by the tittle-tattle of the neighbourhood than she would acknowledge. How my story, or variants of it, had leaked out I know not ; but in the country there are few secrets, and it stood to reason that I could not be going off to the Antipodes for nothing. So somebody heard from somebody else, who had it on the authority of a third person, that my life in London had been one long series of dissolute excesses, culminating in the episode which had condemned me to banishment. One would have thought that the culmination might have sufficed ; but certain ladies felt it to be only right that my mother should hear what had preceded it, and they were not the women to shrink from the performance of a duty, however painful. I contented myself with shrugging my shoulders when their charitable statements were reported to me. I could not feel that it mattered a straw what Mrs. This or Lady That might be pleased to say concerning my actions. But unfortunately it always does matter a little, and if one will not be at the pains of refuting calumnies, one must not wonder at their passing for truth. Thus I had to spend several weeks which were miserable for myself and for those about me.

I could not be sorry when the need of purchasing an outfit gave me an excuse for returning to the scene of my alleged orgies, and on reaching my old Bury Street quarters once more, I registered a vow to remain there until the eve of embarkation.

I did, as it turned out, sit tight in Bury Street until then ; though this entailed a postponement of the date of sailing and a rather longer stay in London than I had contemplated. To be present at Arthur's wedding was the last thing that I desired ; yet, since he made such a point of it, I hardly saw how I was to refuse. I had not been more than a day or two in my rooms when he came to see me. He was just back from Scotland, he said, and he wanted to tell me how frightfully sorry he was for having landed me in such a peck of troubles.

"Upon my honour, old man, I never expected things to work out in this way. It was an awkward fix, I grant you—more awkward for me, by a long sight, than it could be for you—still, when all's said and done, it was the kind of thing that might have happened to anybody. Mind you, I'm not denying that you've behaved like a ripper, and I shall be eternally grateful to you ; only I can't quite see why the affair should be magnified into a tragedy."

"It isn't," I assured him ; "nobody is thinking of doing that with it."

"Oh, I beg your pardon," he returned ; "Uncle Charles is."

"You have seen Uncle Charles, then ?" I asked.

"I should rather think I had ! The old chap came posting over from some place fifty miles away from

where we were on purpose to give me such a rating as I haven't had since I left school. I'm sure you meant well, Peter, but wasn't it a bit risky, sending him to interview the Linterns?"

"I think it was," I acknowledged, "but I was in a cleft stick. Father was capable of going himself or summoning old Lintern; either of which alternatives would have been much worse than letting Uncle Charles take his chance. And, as it is, no harm has been done, for the secret will be kept."

"So he told me," observed Arthur, caressing his chin pensively. "All the same, he said some uncommonly nasty things. He gave me the feeling that—in short, that if I was a gentleman I should own up."

"I forbid you to dream of such a thing!" I exclaimed, in genuine alarm; for, whatever readers of this humble narrative may think of my brother, I, who knew him, was well aware that he was liable to yield to a generous impulse. "If you talk of tragedies, that indeed would be a tragedy of the very first class. No; the trouble, such as it has been, is at an end, and Uncle Charles has at least done us the service of reducing the cost of it by half."

"Which it seems that you propose to pay! Now, you know, Peter, I'm not going to stand that."

"Repay me as soon as it's convenient, then," I answered. "There's no hurry; but I won't refuse to take the money when you can spare it."

I may mention here that he did subsequently

repay me in full. That Arthur was what is commonly called selfish I am not concerned to dispute ; he shared that characteristic with the vast majority of our race. What was all his own was a simple, indescribable loveliness which made it easy for all against whom he had offended to forgive him. As for me, I had not much to forgive him, any tragic element that there was in what had befallen me being mainly of my own creation. He began to tell me what splendid sport Sir John's deer-forest had afforded him, and we had a long and pleasant talk, the only slightly unpleasant feature in which was his insistence upon my attending his wedding, which was to take place at St. Peter's, Eaton Square. I could not say why I would so fain have been excused ; still less could I beg to be let off another ordeal when, at the moment of leaving me, he said :

“ Oh, by the way, I’ve a message for you from Vi. She wants to see you, and you’re to be in Grosvenor Place to-morrow afternoon at five sharp.”

That she really wanted to see me did not seem very probable, and there were, of course, several reasons for my being disinclined to see her. I did as I was bidden, however, and was conducted into the same blue-and-white room where I had held converse with her once before under happier conditions.

“ Peter,” said she, taking me by the hand and looking hard at me, “ you’re a fraud.”

I was all that ; though in a sense of which she was

fortunately ignorant. I said I was sorry that she should think so, and she asked what else I could expect her to think.

"I know it's your *pose* to disdain distinction; but why turn your back upon your future so irrevocably? Why moral suicide? Why Australia?"

"I don't think I shall commit moral suicide by going to Australia," I answered, "and I certainly don't think that I should ever have arrived at distinction by staying here. I shall like the life out there, and I believe, under the circumstances, it's the best place for me."

"Oh, the circumstances!" she broke in, with a slight grimace. "Yes, I've heard about the circumstances, and there again I feel that you're something of a fraud. That sort of thing doesn't sound much like you."

"I don't know what you may have heard," said I, as she seemed to await some rejoinder from me.

"Oh, only what Arthur told me. Never mind; I don't care for the particulars. I suppose all men are the same, and it was silly to set you down as an exception. Anyhow, your indiscretion, or whatever you like to call it, needn't impose deportation."

"I meant to go to Australia independently of what you are talking about," said I.

"Did you, Peter?" she asked quickly. "Why?" It was not the first time that she had tried to

elicit from me an answer to a question which she was assuredly very well able to answer for herself. Men are for ever declaring that they do not understand women (though I have yet to meet the woman who will profess inability to understand men) ; but what we generally mean when we say that is only that women do things which we should not ourselves feel tempted or disposed to do. If I am in love with A. I do not wish B. to avow that she is consumed with a hopeless passion for me ; I would very much rather she did not. Because women are otherwise constituted I don't know that they are therefore incomprehensible. I bore Vi no grudge for resembling the rest of her sex in a well-known respect ; only I could not gratify her by placing that small additional feather—that poor, broken, bedraggled plume !—in her cap. I resolutely refused to say anything more about myself, and for a time we spoke of her own radiant prospects.

Her father was to make her a trifling wedding gift of a place in Norfolk, where there would be shooting and hunting for Arthur ; she supposed they would also have a London house ; money in abundance appeared to be as obvious a postulate as existence. On a sudden, after a pause in our discussion of these matters, she said quite irrelevantly and a shade aggressively :

“ Well, it isn’t *my* fault, Peter.”

“ I never thought it was,” I answered, getting up. I was taken into the drawing-room to see Lady

Humberston, who was looking rather better and who was excited over the preparations for the approaching function, which was to be graced, she told me, by the presence of many illustrious guests.

"It's a love match," said she complacently. "That's what I tell everybody; and how can you have anything better than a love match?"

The inference, no doubt, was that something better from a worldly point of view might have been obtainable; but, lest I should fail to see it, she added :

"And if it comes to old blood, there aren't many older families than yours in England."

Vi's parents must sometimes have made her shiver; but she never allowed anybody to see that they did. Long descent may count for much or little—personally, I cannot help thinking that it counts for a good deal—but there are gentlemen and gentlewomen in all classes, and Vi was one of them. She had a kind heart too. If she had been a little too kind to me, that, as she said, was not her fault, and if in the course of our final interview she had given me some pain, I hardly see how she could have avoided doing so.

It is a trite remark—trite in consequence of being true—that things are seldom quite so bad as one expects them to be. To lie down upon the operating table in the grim presence of grave surgeons and cheerfully expectant nurses is, no doubt, an odious

experience ; but you are given an anæsthetic, and the actual ghastly business (which is what in your heart you have been dreading more than pain or danger) is performed, as it were, in your absence. Anæsthetics of a sort—as symbolised by the chatter of my neighbours and that stunned sense of unreality which usually comes to one's aid on such occasions—enabled me to witness the marriage rite with an unmoved countenance and a tolerably steady pulse. I don't know why I should have been afraid of disgracing myself, because, of course, one never does or can. It was a big affair, admirably staged, and the presents were bewildering in splendour and number. I could not escape the reception in Grosvenor Place ; but the crowd was so great that I managed to slip away, unnoticed, before the departure of the bride and bridegroom.

So then the operation was over, and it only remained for the patient to recover. Some ill-conditioned patients, as we know, annoy the operator by not recovering at all, and I am afraid that, whatever else may have been thought of me by my family at that time, it must have been generally agreed that I was ill-conditioned. I was also very busy, or pretended to be, with final arrangements. I put off my return home until there was but a single day left in which to make my farewells, and even that meagre allowance of time proved excessive. It was excessive because in my last talk with mother there came pauses when we

found forlornly that we had nothing to say. We had exhausted Australia and Uncle Charles's kindness in furnishing me with valuable introductions ; we had finished with sanitary precautions and instructions for the voyage and calculations of the time that it would take for letters to be received and answered. As for the many things of greater interest which we wanted to tell one another, they were ruled out by my forbidding attitude. I did not trust myself to relax it ; I only hoped that in some measure she saw through it and knew that I could not really be the unnatural son I appeared to be.

My father being, after another manner, as keen-sighted as she, I had to be equally on my guard with him, and very likely I accentuated the evasive bearing which, as I was well aware, distressed him by declining to let my eyes meet his for a moment. Of course I now realise that there was not the smallest danger of his discovering the truth and that, if I had not been so mysterious, neither he nor my mother would have imagined that there was much to discover ; but I suppose that those who are weighted with a guilty secret are always prone to fancy themselves on the verge of detection.

Father was not very well, having caught a chill ; so mother and he were unable to accompany me to Plymouth on the dull, wintry day of my embarkation ; but I was escorted on board the liner by Bob and Cicely, with whom I could better afford to be

myself—such as myself was. I remember a queer conviction (altogether erroneous, for the rest) that I was about to make acquaintance with a new self, my old identity belonging so absolutely to the old country that I was leaving. Poor old country, from whose shores such a steady procession of sons far worthier than I sets forth daily, never to return ! Sometimes, after seeing what these emigrants become and achieve beyond the seas, one has a sad impression that the best blood is being drawn from her veins and that a day may come when she will present herself to a potentially hostile Europe in the guise of a worn-out, impotent crone. Yet when one returns to her at the end of a long absence, one does get some sense of persistent vitality. Universal training to arms, with its necessary accompaniment of discipline, would be the saving of her, I believe ; but I understand that any Ministry which introduced such a measure would be liable to lose votes, and that, of course, is a liability which no patriotic Ministry could feel justified in incurring.

Bob rubbed his hands and said he wished he was going with me ; but that was only a way of speaking. He could have had no wish to visit Australia, unless as a member of a cricketing team ; though he may have thought that I wanted cheering up. Cicely, who kissed and hugged me, regardless of the assembled passengers, whispered in my ear, as a last word, “ Come back to us, Peter—come back soon ! ”

Then the tender received them and the screw

began to throb. Soon we were out in a grey-green, tumbling sea, while low clouds, hurrying up from the eastward, blotted out the coastline and fell like a curtain upon the first stage of my earthly career.

CHAPTER XIV

WAROOMBA

I WAS in Australia for eight years, respecting which I do not feel as if there was a great deal to be said, save that they brought me financial prosperity. I landed at Melbourne, where, thanks to Uncle Charles's letters of introduction, I became acquainted with various kind and hospitable people who gave me excellent advice, which, as it turned out, I did not take. No doubt I should have done so, and should have settled myself down in Victoria, if I had not had the luck—luck I think I must call it—to fall in with a man named Wardrop, who persuaded me to join him in a horse-breeding enterprise in Queensland. Wardrop, a genial giant of five and thirty or thereabouts, took a liking to me for some reason or other before he knew that I had a few thousand pounds to invest, and, despite certain infirmities of his which leaped to the eye, I found myself drawn towards him. I was duly cautioned with regard to the infirmities, and my good friends at Melbourne were disposed to shake their heads over him; but I thought, upon the whole, I would trust my own judgment. He had

experience and ability, but had no capital ; so we seemed fitted to supplement one another, and such inquiries as I was able to make satisfied me that we ought to have a very fair chance of doing well with our venture.

We secured without difficulty a tract of land suitable to our purpose in the Darling Downs country and, owing to the good fortune which attended—or perhaps, speaking of Jack Wardrop, I should rather say the sagacity which dictated—our initial purchases, we had not long to wait for lucrative results. We had stock as well as horses ; but it was my partner's unerring eye for the latter that was the making of us. In a deal concerning horseflesh nobody could get the better of him, and very few people tried. Although, naturally, we bred a certain number of bad ones, we had a large proportion of successes. Our principle was to get the best strain obtainable, and it paid us handsomely in the long run, as I suppose it always does. In the capacity of a rough-rider Jack Wardrop was supreme. He used to break in our colts speedily and with little trouble, no matter how tricky they might be—and Australian colts have some diabolical tricks. He was not brutal in his methods, preferring to trust to patience, of which he had plenty, and to the inability of his pupils to shift him ; for he was a heavily-built, long-legged fellow whose grip and balance were unshakable.

As for me, I made no attempt to emulate his

feats. I had to be in the saddle every day and pretty nearly all day, rounding up cattle and so forth ; but a sober beast was always at my service, so that riding of an easy character soon became a second nature to me. Soon, too, I grew habituated and even attached to a life for which I was not, perhaps, over well adapted. The thin, clear air and the sense of space and freedom suited me ; I had no objection to the monotony which often irked my more restless partner, nor did I mind the occasional fierce heat of the summers. Also I took a delight which never quite wore off in the strangeness of everything—the unfamiliar vegetation, the singing magpies, the ludicrous duets of laughing jackasses on still evenings, the lovely pale gold of the wattle-blossom, the soft sadness of the red gums and sheoaks which surrounded Waroomba, as our station was named. It was a sorry shanty when we first took possession of it ; but we added to it and made it more habitable when the money began to come in. That is to say that I did ; for a blanket to sleep in and some sort of a corrugated roof to shelter his head would have satisfied my partner's domestic exigencies. He was the simplest of mortals and, save in that one matter of the purchase or sale of horses, the most easily beguiled. At tolerably regular intervals he would betake himself to Brisbane, sometimes pushing adventure as far as Sydney, and the first thing that he did on reaching either of those places was to get gloriously drunk.

I knew this, though I never accompanied him on his expeditions, for he made no secret of it. His accounts of what happened next were, as was to be expected, rather obscure ; but I imagine that cards and sharpers relieved him without loss of time of all his available cash. When he returned, penniless, he resembled nothing so much as a schoolboy who has broken every rule and looks shamefacedly for condign punishment. Why he should have been so afraid of the grave rebukes with which I did not fail to receive him I cannot tell ; but luckily he was, and it would never have done to spare him a word of them. Not that they prevented him from falling away again when the fit took him ; but the dread of them did, I think, stave off the recurrence of the fit for as long as was possible.

“ Peter,” he would groan remorsefully (from the first we had taken to calling one another by our Christian names), “ I’m a low-down sot, and I know it as well as you can. I’ve nothing to say for myself—not a blamed syllable ! What beats me is your going on putting up with me as you do. To leave you here for weeks, doing all the work, while I chuck away your money on riotous living—there’s no name for it ! If you were to tell me to clear out of this to-morrow I couldn’t complain.”

When he talked like that I had to remind him that if the original capital had been mine, the money which it had been made to produce had been earned by him, and, as this could not be denied,

it consoled him a little. But, penitent or peccant, there was not much to be done with him. He himself said, and I daresay with truth, that it was his nature to be what he was and that nobody can help his nature. He never got drunk at Waroomba. Certainly he did put away what seemed to me an extraordinary quantity of whisky ; but it had no perceptible effect upon him and, except for a day or two after one of his outbreaks, he enjoyed the best of health. The men in our employment—a roughish lot, some of them—loved him, and he was indeed a lovable, brave, primitive creature who wronged nobody but himself. Often he deplored his lack of education, which he made spasmodic efforts to remedy by dipping into one or other of the books that composed my modest library ; but as history, philosophy, poetry, theology and fiction had alike the invariable effect of sending him to sleep in a quarter of an hour, he never arrived at understanding why study of the printed page stood in lieu of a spree to me. Nor, for the matter of that, could he understand why a person of my vast and varied learning should be content to lie hidden in the interior of Queensland.

“ You’re thrown away here, Peter,” he frequently declared ; “ this is no place for you and the job’s no job for you. You’ll drop it, I expect,” he would add with a sigh, “ when you’ve made a bit more at the game—and quite right too ! ”

But I had no intention of abandoning him or

Australia, and if he was puzzled by my immobility, he was too much of a gentleman in his instincts to question me. As time went on, many incidents and episodes occurred to strengthen our mutual affection, and strange as it may seem, considering that we were all but entirely dependent upon one another for society, we never once fell out.

Again and again my mother and Cicely pressed me to visit England, and season after season I put off complying with their entreaties, though I had no convincing excuse to make. After the first few years I could well have afforded to grant myself the holiday for which on some accounts I longed ; nevertheless it is possible to desire a thing and shrink from it at one and the same time. I daresay I am a queer customer ; I have frequently been assured that I am, and now in my old age I do perceive that I differ from the mass of mankind in my stolid unchangeableness. It seems as if the happy and useful gift of oblivion had been denied to me. Of course I was well aware that my old life was as dead as if it had never been ; yet—because for me it refused to die—I was reluctant to visit its grave. I could not, to put the thing shortly, reconcile myself to the prospect of friendly intercourse with my sister-in-law ; for she, at any rate, was so dead that it would be dreadful to see her brilliantly alive.

Poor Lady Humberston had died in a more literal

sense within a few months of her daughter's marriage, and Sir John had lost no time in fulfilling Bob's prediction by marrying again and begetting sons. This necessarily diminished the glory of Vi's expectations ; but I suppose the Humberston wealth must have been inexhaustible, for I gathered from Cicely's letters that Arthur had money in abundance. He had started a racing-stable, amongst other things, and his wife entertained upon a scale which was said to have brought her social renown. She had had one child—a boy who had died in infancy. Since then her health had not been very satisfactory ; although, according to Cicely, she had not let it interfere with her many activities.

It was in the seventh year of my sojourn at Waroomba that I received the sad and wholly unexpected news of my father's death from pneumonia. Then indeed, when it was too late, I reproached myself for my resistance of an invitation which he had more than once seconded. I had had many affectionate letters from him, not one of which had contained any allusion to what he may have come to regard as a solitary juvenile escapade ; still, now that he was gone, I realised as I had never done before that at the back of my mind there had always been a little hope of his somehow, some day, discovering that the cloud under which I had quitted home had been none of my creation. Well, that was not to be, and what grieved me was the remembrance that in my last days with him I had deemed

it indispensable to show him an obdurate countenance.

I did not go home at once. I was not wanted, and until my mother and Cicely should have established themselves at Moorcross, which was the name of our old dower house, I was probably better away. But in the following year appeals became once more so urgent that I could no longer turn a deaf ear to them. It is true that I had one reason for hesitating which I have not mentioned. I doubted whether it would be altogether safe to leave Jack Wardrop in sole charge of the station. I had never seen him in one of his drinking bouts, because, as I have said, he made it a rule to absent himself when they were imminent ; but I had heard from others that, when under the sway of liquor, he was awkward to come across. Certain stories of wrecked bars and street scrimmages were not of a nature to reassure me. Good-natured as he was, he was scarcely, even when sober, the kind of man whom anybody would care to irritate, nor was it at all likely that our overseer or the other men about the place would attempt to tackle him under less favourable conditions. I could well imagine him setting fire to our highly inflammable dwelling, and incendiarism in Australia may be a very terrible affair. Having witnessed several bush fires, I knew with what fatal ease they can be kindled and what devastation they are apt to bring about before they die down. Now I was quite sure that, owing to the

feeling that he had for me, Jack would not get drunk on the premises so long as I was there ; but I could not feel equally confident as to what might happen when I was away. So all this gave me pause. I had made up my mind to read him a homily and to exact solemn pledges from him, when he astonished me and diverted me from my purpose by asking whether I should object very much to his adding a young woman to the strength of the establishment. No doubt I looked rather blank ; for he burst out laughing and said :

“ Oh, nothing of that sort, old chap ; don’t be alarmed. It’s only my niece.”

Even so, the proposal was more surprising than attractive. I kept silence, pending explanations, which were furnished at considerable length, though somewhat disjointedly.

“ You see,” Jack began, “ my poor brother Harry went under a while ago. I knew how it would be ; but what’s the use of talking to a man who thinks he knows better ? Because you’ve made a lucky spec. or two it don’t follow that you can afford to cut a dash at Melbourne and run horses that haven’t an outside chance. Let alone backing them, as he always would, whether they had four legs or three. Well, that couldn’t go on. The month before last the crash came, and he put a revolver to his head, poor beggar ! Thought there wasn’t anything else to be done, I suppose—and maybe there wasn’t.”

This was the first that I had heard of the deceased ;

for just as Jack had refrained from asking me for more information about my belongings than I had volunteered, so had I forborene to question him about his. I was, in truth, under the impression that he had none. His brother and he had not, it appeared, been upon the best of terms—"He said I was no credit to him, which was true enough," Jack modestly owned—but there had for a long time been a desultory correspondence with the niece, who was described as "a real good girl and a lady all over."

"And now she is left destitute?" I suggested.

Jack nodded. "That's about the size of it. I had a letter from her to-day. She don't propose to come and live here, you understand; but I can't think of any other way of fixing the poor girl up, can you?"

I could not; nor could I be such a curmudgeon as to veto Jack's plan, though it was not, I confess, much to my liking. So Miss Dora Wardrop arrived at Brisbane by the first available steamer from Melbourne—a handsome, self-possessed young woman, with black eyes and hair, who, I am bound to say, soon proved that her uncle had not flattered her unduly in calling her a good girl. As for her being "a lady all over"—well, standards differ, and the point, in any case, was of small importance. Promptly and efficiently she took charge of household matters and demonstrated to us how shockingly uncomfortable we had been prior to her advent

She did not mind hard work, notwithstanding the life of ease and affluence which seemed to have been hers at Melbourne ; she was brisk, cheerful and authoritative in her own sphere after a fashion to which we could not take exception. From the first her uncle was her willing and submissive servant, and if I declined to assume a similar attitude, it was not because she and I failed to hit it off. I liked the girl, and she was good enough to tell me, with a frank laugh, that she liked me. Frankness being one of her many excellent qualities, she did not hesitate to mention that she was acquainted with her uncle's foible, which she stated that it was her resolve to cure. I hardly thought that she would manage that ; but I was encouraged to inform her, in the same connection, of my wish to make a trip to England ; whereupon she confidently proclaimed her readiness and ability to replace me.

" Be off as soon as ever you like, Mr. Vaux, and don't worry about Uncle Jack. Depend upon it, he'll behave himself while my eye is upon him, and my eye isn't going to be off him for many hours together."

" I'm not quite as sure of you as you are of yourself," said I.

" That's because you're a man," she returned. " If you were a woman, you'd know that men like Uncle Jack are just the very easiest ones to control. Leave him to me and there'll be no trouble in this house, I promise you."

Thus was Miss Dora a veritable godsend to me. That Jack Wardrop would pay periodical visits to Brisbane, with the usual consequences, whilst I was away might be taken for granted ; but Brisbane is provided with fire-engines, police and other safeguards. My anxiety was solely for Waroomba, which I now felt was under fairly trustworthy supervision.

Poor Jack was rather down in the mouth about my departure. He said he was certain that I should never come back and only shook his head when I protested that nothing in the world could be more certain than my return.

“ You don’t know your own value, Peter,” he sighed ; “ but other people do, and once they get hold of you over there they’ll be mighty unlikely to leave go of you again.”

What he supposed to be my value to my native land I cannot imagine. He had the wildest notions about my capabilities, though he had had ample opportunity of realising how small they were. One is not—fortunately—misled by those who rate one above one’s actual worth ; yet it is a joy to be thus overrated, because one knows that the prompting impulse can only be affection, and to have inspired affection is perhaps something to be proud of when one cannot justify one’s imputed pride on any other pretence. Not proudly, but very humbly and gratefully, do I acknowledge that I have had more than my share of affection during my earthly

pilgrimage, and I never shall be able to understand why. As for my good Jack, his nature was such that if he did not quarrel with you five minutes after making your acquaintance, he was pretty certain, with your permission, to be your friend for the rest of your days. He remained mine, I am glad to say, until the end of his.

CHAPTER XV

CHANGES AND CONSTANCIES

THOUGH I truly said at the end of the last chapter that I have had more affection than I have deserved, that does not mean that I have always recognised or appreciated it as I ought to have done. Often enough have I fancied myself of small account to those for whom I have cared most, and seldom have I been able to let them see how dear they were to me. However, when I returned home in the month of June, 1895, I was so overjoyed at meeting two of them again that for once I fairly let myself go, and the memory of my mother's and Cicely's welcome remains with me, comforting and exhilarating, to this present hour. For a tenacious memory has its boons as well as its banes. Personally, I don't forget things, and upon the whole I am glad that I don't; but I am also very glad that other people do. Most heartily so was I to perceive, as I very soon did, that the circumstances under which I had left England had passed clean away from the minds of the two dear women who sat on either side of me, each holding one of my hands and both gazing at me with a sort

of exultation which made me laugh, though it went near to making me cry too. To be sure, I had been successful—as successful as the conditions would permit—and in the kindness of their hearts they chose to treat that as a merit, even comparing me to the much more strikingly successful Bob, who, at the early age of thirty-one, enjoyed a lucrative practice and was already the father of a family.

“ You’ll see Tom at dinner,” my mother told me. “ He ran down for a day or two on purpose to meet you ; but he’s tremendously busy, he says.”

Tom had gratified my poor father, as I had so sadly failed to do, by taking Orders. He was at that time a curate in a London parish and was said to be a stirring preacher.

“ Arthur wanted to appoint him to Chivenham when Mr. Rimmington died,” mother went on ; “ but it really wouldn’t have done, and he himself felt that he was too young. So then Arthur said he would do the next best thing by putting in somebody well stricken in years, and we have a dear old gentleman who takes the greatest care of himself, subsists chiefly on nuts and radishes and looks as if he might last until Tom is deep in middle age.”

I asked her a number of questions for the pleasure of listening to her ; though her letters had kept me pretty well posted in the family annals. I knew that Cicely had refused several offers of marriage, and I knew why. It seemed a pity ; yet I suppose mother would have been rather forlorn without her,

and she had the appearance of being, as I believe she was, perfectly contented. If Cicely were asked to-day whether her life had been a happy one, she would doubtless reply, without hesitation or mental reservation, that it had. There are a few people like that in this self-engrossed world, and when one thinks of them one can't despair of the human race, for all one's depressing knowledge of the majority to which one belongs. As for my mother and sister, they were a couple of optimists. When there was anything good to be said concerning persons or circumstances, they said it with alacrity ; when there was not, they turned their attention elsewhere, and I wondered whether that was why they had not much to tell me about Arthur. They did mention him once or twice, but a trifle hurriedly, as if they were not anxious to dwell upon the subject.

"He has to be in London just now because of Ascot," Cicely said, "but Vi thinks he may come down for a day or two soon."

Then my mother explained that Vi was not very strong and could not stand the fatigue of rushing about to race-meetings. She was at Chivenham, and I must go and see her on the morrow.

Well, of course I should have to pay that fraternal visit, and it was really ridiculous of me to be thrown into a tremor at the prospect after eight long years ; but, as I said just now, time has a tiresome trick of standing still with me. Not that the outward and

visible signs of the passage of time are less conspicuous to me than to my neighbours. I had perforce noted them during my long colloquy with my mother, whom it was unavoidably a little sad and disturbing to see in her new frame, picturesque though that frame was. Moorcross is a very old house, dating in part from the thirteenth century, and, although of modest dimensions, it has a certain celebrity in our county by reason of its tapestries and ancient furniture. Comfortable to live in I cannot call it ; for its ceilings are low, its small, diamond-paned windows admit but a minimum of sunshine and its much-admired floors of polished oak are a perpetual trap for the unwary. Mother would not allow that the place disagreed with her, nor would she suffer herself to be kept warm by such an anachronism as hot-water pipes ; but she was never really well during her sojourn there. When the dinner hour came, we seated ourselves upon high-backed chairs at an Elizabethan table, provided with a wanton rail which caught the guest on the shins just as he was sitting down and caused him to say something quite unlike a grace before meat. I must, however, confess that on that warm June evening, with the scent of the roses wafted to us through the open windows, Moorcross was not devoid of charm. Perhaps, after all, what I stupidly resented was mother's eviction from our old home, with which she was for ever identified in my thoughts.

Sleek Tom (I can't help calling him sleek, for no other adjective seems so suitable to the smiling, well-grown, well-groomed cleric that he was) informed me over our port that the old home had been transformed almost beyond recognition.

"For the better, you'll say, and I can't deny that everything has been done in the best taste ; still one always hates to see familiar features changed, don't you think so ? "

I thought so and said so. Then I inquired casually whether the new squire was making himself popular in the neighbourhood ; to which Tom replied, with a shrug :

"Oh, well, yes, I suppose he is. Spending money freely is a shorter road to popularity than setting a good example, I'm afraid."

I said I hoped Arthur was not setting a bad one, and my young parson had several remarks to make in a severely professional tone as to that. The support which my father had always given to Church work had, it appeared, fallen into abeyance ; subscriptions had taken the place of personal interest ; Arthur was seldom in residence at Chivenham and never for long at a time. He was, in short, entirely absorbed by the turf. "Which," Tom concluded, "is as much as to say that he is doing all he can to encourage what is, upon the whole, the most mischievous and demoralising of all legalised evils."

"And I who earn a modest livelihood mainly by breeding racehorses !" I murmured.

That, Tom was so kind as to say, was a totally different thing from backing them. “ I’ve nothing against racing as racing ; only you’ve got to be a curate in a London parish to realise the curse of betting. It’s almost as bad as drink and it’s worse than public lotteries.”

For my own part, I have always had doubts about the heinousness of public lotteries. Backing horses is undoubtedly a fool’s game ; but the vast numerical preponderance of fools has to be taken into account, together with the well-nigh universal love of a wager. Is it not certain that if horse-racing were abolished, fools would find another sportive method of impoverishing themselves ? I said something of this sort, and Tom rejoined :

“ Well, you wanted to know whether Arthur was setting a good example. I can’t feel that he is. Not in any way. One has to assume that his father-in-law is financing him ; but, if so, it’s scarcely dignified, and he must be spending a frightful lot of money. I am always seeing in the papers that he has lost heavily over some race or other.”

Nor did this exhaust the list of my elder brother’s derelictions. Tom made no bones about adding—and here, as may be supposed, I pricked up my ears—that he was anything but an ideal husband.

“ Oh, I don’t say that he ill-treats his wife or even that he is actively unkind to her ; only he doesn’t bother himself about her. She is left alone for weeks together, and, plucky as she is, I’m sure she

feels it. She seems to me to be in wretched health too, poor woman!"

Nothing was more likely—nothing was more certain—than that Arthur would not bother himself much about a wife who, from considerations of health, had to be left at home. To stay at home with her would have been a proceeding foreign to his whole nature, which nevertheless was far from being an unkindly one. I comforted myself with the reflection that in all that long time Vi must surely have discovered just what he was and was not. I was, to tell the truth, a little relieved to find that Tom had no more serious accusation to bring against Arthur in his marital capacity.

What did sound to me rather disquieting were those reports of heavy turf losses. Slight as was my acquaintance with the details of racing, I was aware that in this country it is a pastime restricted to the rich; and that more than one rich man has found no difficulty in ruining himself at it is common knowledge. Since Arthur's inheritance could not suffice to make him wealthy in the modern acceptation of the term, it looked very much as if he must be playing ducks and drakes with his wife's fortune, and I fully expected to hear from Cicely, of whom I made inquiries, that that was just what he was doing. Cicely, however, believed that Vi's capital was strictly tied up. As for the interest, that was, of course, another thing.

"Sir John Humberston has come to the rescue

over and over again," she told me. "Sir John is very fond of Arthur—rather proud of him too, I think. Still an end comes to everything, and he now intimates that, while he doesn't grudge an occasional contribution to what he calls legitimate expenses, he isn't going to pay any more betting debts."

"That seems reasonable enough," I observed.

"Arthur doesn't think so. He says you can't race without betting, unless you're a millionaire, and you can't disentangle one set of expenses from another. Well, it's certain that *he* can't, poor fellow! When weren't his expenses in a tangle! It's only fair to remember that he succeeded to a reduced rent-roll, as well as to any number of moral liabilities, which he has insisted upon meeting. You know how generous he is—and how generous father always was."

This might be exculpatory, but it was scarcely reassuring. I did not like to allude to Arthur's relations with his wife, nor did Cicely volunteer any information; but in the afternoon when I was leaving the house, bound—with an absurd shyness and reluctance—for Chivenham, she came running out, her eyes joyously bright and a telegram in her hand.

"Such good news!" she cried. "Prospero has won the Hunt Cup."

I said I was glad to hear it, if Prospero was Arthur's horse.

" You can't be half as glad as I am," returned Cicely, with a great sigh. " Arthur told me the other day that he would be dead broke if he didn't win and that he hadn't more than a bare chance of winning. He is rather fond of saying that sort of thing, but I had a horrid fear that it was serious this time." She thrust the telegram into my hand, adding : " There !—now you can present yourself to Vi as the bearer of glad tidings."

I thought it more probable that I should be the reporter of stale news ; for if Moorcross had received a despatch from Ascot, Chivenham could hardly have been neglected ; yet it was something to arrive at an auspicious moment, just as it is something to embark upon an adventure in fine weather. To me what lay before me was an adventure. I had no notion of what it was going to be like ; I only knew that it could not fail to be momentous ; because I had not changed, because everybody and everything else had of necessity changed, and because during eight years I had never fancied, or wished to fancy, Vi other than what she had been in my departed youth.

I duly encountered the shock for which my conscious unpreparedness had prepared me. The lady who got up quickly from the low couch upon which she had been extended when I was shown into the modernised Chivenham library was so pale, so emaciated, so hollow-eyed that if I had not known who she was I might not have recognised her ; but

it was Vi's old voice that greeted me and it was quite in her old manner that she caught my hand, exclaiming :

“ Oh, dear Peter ! How glad I am ! ”

“ If you're glad,” I returned, being wholly at a loss for words and saying the first silly thing that came into my head, “ that's all I want.”

She made me sit down by the sofa, apologising for being obliged to put her feet up, and demanded a categorical account of all that had befallen me beneath the Southern Cross. Of herself she refused to speak until I should have finished.

“ No,” said she, “ I asked first and it's for you to answer first. Moreover, you're interesting and I'm not.”

My humdrum chronicle could not be made interesting ; but I took a longish time over it, owing to her frequent queries and interpellations. More especially she required a minute description of Miss Dora Wardrop, and I had some ado to persuade her that that young woman was as innocent of setting her cap at me as I was of any disposition to espouse her. It was rather like a dream, all of it—Vi's alternate raillery and cajolery, the quick verbal assaults with which she disconcerted me, my stuttering rejoinders and the laughter to which she was moved thereby. We might have been at Hallcombe on a summer's afternoon, she and I, as in the days that were dead. The room was partially darkened and her head was turned away from the light, which may have helped

the illusion ; but when at length I reminded her that it was now her turn, she exclaimed :

“ Oh, bother ! Well, pull up the blind then.”

And as soon as I had obeyed, she turned towards me, so that the admitted sunlight fell full upon her.

“ There ! ” said she ; “ there’s your dramatic answer for you. Did you ever see such a hag ! ”

Her beauty, alas ! was all but gone, and I was sorry. Not that I had ever loved her in the least degree for the sake of her beauty, only I was sorry because of the tragedy which such a loss must needs be to any woman and still more because of what it implied. She read my thoughts at once and replied to them in the old familiar fashion.

“ Yes, it’s a bad job, isn’t it ? But cheer up ; I’m not as ill as I look. The doctors tell me I shall get all right again if I take care of myself ; so I’ve been patiently taking care of myself for I don’t know how long. And really, Peter, that’s all my history, barring a few incidents which you’ll have heard of from your mother and Cicely.”

It was, at any rate, all that she wished to recount. Presently she began to speak of Arthur in a way which struck me as pathetic by reason of her evident eagerness to represent that he was kind and thoughtful ; for I had not hinted at his being anything else. She remarked that the breeding of horses appeared to be a family failing, though there had been more failing about it in his case than in mine, and this

reminded me of the telegram, which I showed her ; but she was only languidly interested.

" Prospero ? " said she. " Yes, I think I remember the name ; I can't say I remember the animal. Well, if he has won a race, he has done something to distinguish himself from his stable companions. But, Peter, you aren't going back to *your* stable and your Wardrop companions and your remote, upside-down Australia, are you ? "

I answered that I most certainly was, such being my manifest destiny.

" Oh, one's destiny ! " she rejoined, a little impatiently, " one's destiny is what one chooses to make it. Surely it isn't too late for you to revert to yours ! "

It was very much too late to revert to projects in which I had never had a great deal of faith ; yet I was touched and gratified to find her still ambitious on my behalf. Having drawn from me the admission that I could, at need, realise a sum sufficient to afford me a modest competency, she besought me to remain in England and seek election to Parliament, where she strangely averred that I should be in my proper sphere. To humour her, and because I loved to hear her talk like that, I affected to discuss this question, knowing all the time, of course, that it was outside the range of reasonable discussion ; but soon I saw that I must bring my visit to an end. In spite of her assumed vivacity (which broke down every now and then),

she was growing more and more perceptibly tired out, and when I got up she did not try to detain me. I was, however, to come back soon and often, she said.

"Arthur may be down for the week-end ; but I'm not sure. He has such heaps of engagements, and while I'm in this useless state it's really more considerate of him to leave me to my own devices. Not of *you*, though ! Your clearly indicated duty, bear in mind, is to visit the sick."

I took away conflicting impressions. She had been very good and kind to me ; in speech she had been more like her old self than I had ventured to hope that she would be. On the other hand, it was impossible to doubt that she was thoroughly ill. Whether she was happy or unhappy I could not tell. Perhaps she was neither, and perhaps that is the normal condition of the average mortal. But it is not what one desires for the mortal whom one loves best in the world.

CHAPTER XVI

THE MARRIED ON MARRIAGE

I HEARD, the next morning, from Cicely that Vi was not quite so well and had been advised to stay in bed. I did not, therefore, repeat my visit to Chivenham on that or on the following day ; but on the Saturday Arthur made his appearance, back from Ascot in high spirits and more than glad, he declared, to see me in the old country again.

“ Australia seems to have agreed with you, Peter,” said he, surveying my person critically. “ You’re twice the man you were, and you don’t look a day older either.”

I could not respond with a flattering *tu quoque*. His wonderful good looks had not deserted him ; but there were faint lines running from his nostrils to the corners of his mouth which were new to me, his eyelids had grown rather heavy, and something in him, elusive yet discernible, seemed to suggest worry and weariness. No such suggestion, however, was conveyed by his conversation, which was as joyous and sustained as a schoolboy’s. I daresay mother and Cicely had seen him of late in a different

mood ; for their faces were the index of the pleasure that he was giving them, and indeed we had a long and pleasant chat together, recalling old times and old memories.

Walking part of the way back to Chivenham with him, at his request, I learned that he had been passing through an anxious period, to which Prospero's victory had fortunately put a term. He said that, with anything like ordinary luck, he ought to be pretty well all right now, but that racing was a lottery, as everybody knew—

“ Except my funny old father-in-law, who seems to think it's a trade. He's always going on at me for having what he calls ‘ no business aptitudes.’ As if I had ever set up to have any ! ”

“ Was a racing stable a necessary thing to set up ? ” I ventured to ask.

Arthur slipped his arm through mine. “ My dear Peter,” he answered gravely, “ to me it's indispensable. I can't explain why any more than you can explain why it's indispensable to you to read books. You don't read only for the sake of information, I suppose, and I don't breed or buy horses only for the sake of winning stakes, though of course that's what I try to do. The love of these things is in one's blood. Take racing away from me and what have I left ? ”

I said : “ I should have thought you would have a good deal.”

“ You would, would you ? Oh yes—a nice

property, hunting and shooting, a charming wife. Only it isn't all joy, let me tell you, to be a landed proprietor, and the hunting hereabouts is rotten, and I can't afford to hunt with the Quorn, and if one's charming wife is always seedy——”

“ She can't help that,” I observed.

“ Oh, I don't say she can *help* it.”

“ But you think it's rough on you.”

“ Well, so it is, my dear chap. There's no getting away from the fact that it's rough on me.”

He could get away from the subject, though, which was perhaps the best way to treat it. He wanted to know what class of horse we chiefly went in for at Waroomba ; he also wanted to know what I did with myself when I was not professionally occupied, and he seemed to be interested in the not very interesting episodes of bush life which I described. I think Arthur had always had an affection for me and had always known, in spite of my reserve and uncouthness, how fond I was of him. I wondered whether he would make any allusion to Miss Dulcie Wynne ; but he did not. Probably the whole affair had long faded from his recollection.

I suppose that no human being ever completely understands another. The broad outlines of a character, which are commonly taken as constituting it, are easily enough grasped ; so that, since we ourselves are never inconsistent—strictly speaking, cannot be—we are perpetually marvelling

at the inconsistencies of our neighbours. About the last thing over which I should have expected Arthur to fret was the accident of Vi's childlessness ; but Cicely assured me that the death of his infant son had been a lasting grief to him. It was because he had no heir, nor the prospect of one, that he was a disappointed man, and if he was less domestic than could be wished, the reason was the same. This, of course, was no unusual phenomenon ; only it was a revelation to me that Arthur was susceptible of being thus affected. I should have said that he might be fond of children if they happened to be there, but that it would be very much the same thing to him if they were not. However, I was mistaken. He himself confided to me, a day or two afterwards, that he would cheerfully exchange his racing stud for a son and heir.

“It’s hard luck,” he sighed. “Look at old Humberston ! For that matter, look at the impécunious parsons all over the country whose quivers are full of arrows which they would be delighted to shoot into space ! Whereas Vi . . . Oh, now you’re going to say that it isn’t her fault. Of course it isn’t ; nobody says it is. For all that, it *is* hard luck !”

Perhaps so, and perhaps it was still harder luck to be laid on the shelf, as Vi was. At the time when Arthur delivered himself as above she had become so ill that a London doctor had been sent for, and we were then awaiting his report. She was suffering,

I had been told, from some slight affection of the spine which, it was hoped, would prove merely temporary, but which gave her great pain at times and which might be the herald of worse things. Arthur was not uneasy about her; still he could scarcely leave home until she took a turn for the better, and, though he made no verbal complaint, I divined that he felt that also to be hard luck.

"The institution of marriage," he observed, with some solemnity, "is the corner-stone of civilised life. You could no more get on without it than you could afford to abolish prisons or taxes or other aids to promoting the greatest happiness of the greatest number. But it has its seamy side. Be advised by me, Peter, and don't you marry. Be a merry bachelor, like old Uncle Charles."

I was replying that it was my firm purpose to remain a bachelor, but that I was not quite so sure about the merriment, when Arthur was called away to see the doctor. After about a quarter of an hour he returned, bringing what I took to be, upon the whole, a favourable verdict.

"Oh, the old story!—complete rest and tonics and so forth. Every hope of ultimate recovery, provided that rules are observed. No cause for anxiety, no danger to life. Just what I expected, in short."

The air and tone with which he spoke gave me a sudden cold shiver. It had not been wholly

agreeable to him to be told that there was no danger, then ? But in an instant I recognised the baseness of my half-formed suspicion, which indeed would not have been so much as half-formed had I not remembered that oddly vehement longing of his for an heir. Nevertheless, I rose hastily, being afraid of what he might say next. What he did dejectedly say was :

“ I’ve got to kick my heels here for another ten days or so, it seems. Look me up and cheer me up as often as you can, that’s all ! ”

He soon secured more cheerful companionship than mine, Daisy and her husband very kindly consenting to devote a week out of their busy lives to a mission of mercy. They were so good as to say that my presence in the neighbourhood gave them an additional inducement ; but that, I imagine, was only their nice way of putting things. Never a word had I heard from Daisy during all my long absence, and I shall hardly do her an injustice if I add that never a thought had she bestowed upon me. She had had such a multiplicity of other things to think about ! Great ladies and smart ladies have entered sparsely into my field of observation ; but amongst the few with whom I have been brought into contact not one has intimidated me so much as my second sister. Daisy dwelt in a world so far removed from mine—a world of Royalties, Ambassadors, Cabinet Ministers and their like—that I fell humbly mute in her presence, conscious that no topic upon

which I was capable of speaking could have the faintest attraction for her.

“ Australia ? Oh yes, kangaroos and sheep and—and cricketers, aren’t there ? What does one do in Australia besides playing cricket and shearing sheep ? Not a creature to speak to, I suppose.”

I don’t know whether other people found Daisy as crushing as I did or not. Probably not ; for she was really an easy-mannered, amicable sort of person. She seemed to be attached to Vi and was quite devoted to Arthur, with whom she had doubtless more in common than she could have with me.

Donnington, who had evolved into an urbane, slightly pompous Ministerial functionary, took advantage of his vicinity to Plymouth to address a public meeting there, and it was my privilege to hear him speak, which he did quite well, in a cautious, measured style. Donnington had, and has, all the qualifications of statesmanship, barring initiative—and that, to be sure, is scarcely essential in the party which I have unobtrusively supported all my life long. Daisy still sees no reason why he should not end by becoming Prime Minister ; only the Radicals, not to mention sundry brother Tories, are rather in the way.

At the end of a week the august couple departed, carrying off Arthur with them, and Vi—now down-stairs again and decidedly better—hoisted the signal for which I was straining my eyes. I found her

bravely acquiescent in the inaction to which she had been sentenced, though naturally regretful at its prolongation.

"It's a bore," she remarked, "to have to lie on one's back all day, and it doesn't seem to be exactly the purpose that I was created for either; but one must take what comes. Arthur has been able to leave me with a clear conscience, anyhow; so that's one blessing."

It crossed my mind that a conscience like Arthur's must be one of the greatest of earthly blessings; but I did not say that. I forget what I did say; though I remember her rejoinder of :

"Peter, you and I object to being compassionated, don't we? It isn't that we're ungrateful; only the touch of a soothing hand does somehow rough up our wiry coats. So if you'll be an angel and abstain from telling me how sorry you are for me, I'll do my best not to pity you by word of mouth. Is it a bargain?"

"Yes, if you like," I answered, "but really I am not at all to be pitied."

"Ah, there you go! showing your teeth at the merest hint of commiseration. Admit at least that you're lonely."

"I am perfectly willing to admit that," I replied. "Some people thrive on loneliness."

"Oh, hermits and anchorites and such freaks. Yes, I suppose they manage to do with neglect and perhaps like it; but they can hardly be said to

thrive, can they? You, at any rate, are one of those plants which obviously demand intensive culture. There are all manner of possibilities in you; only somebody else must draw them out. *You never will.*"

Modesty and a sense of the ridiculous forbid me to set down her enlargements upon this theme. Always, in the old days, she had magnified my abilities and knowledge. She had, I take it, formed an estimate of me at starting which she had been unable to discard, notwithstanding its proved inaccuracy. I have had a similar experience myself with horses more than once. One does not like to think, and practically cannot think, that one's judgment has been altogether at fault. What Vi deduced from hers was that I must not be allowed to drift back to the interior of Queensland, and when I declared that the life there suited me better than a sedentary one at home, she refused to believe the statement.

"Oh, you say that; it's just possible that you may even think it—or think you think it. But it isn't a bit true. You'll be telling me next that you're happy. And oh, my dear Peter, do you imagine yourself able to conceal from me that you're nothing of the sort?"

"Aren't we getting rather near a breach of our contract?" I asked.

"I don't care if we are; I'm going to say my say. Peter, I've been thinking about you a great deal

since I saw you last, and I've now come to the definite conclusion that you must marry."

"That I most positively shall not do," said I.

"But why not? If ever there was a man who cried aloud for a wife, without knowing it, you are he. Perhaps you'll give me credit for understanding you?"

Remembering what she had just been saying, I had to shake my head.

"No? Then I'll make bold to boast that I do. You aren't, after all, such a profound enigma; only, as you don't in the least understand yourself, you'll never do the things that you can do and ought to do unless you have a wife to keep egging you on. Oh, I grant you that you'll be henpecked; but, as you won't mind, that's of no consequence. The problem is to find the lady."

"It's an insoluble one," I answered. "She can't be found, because she doesn't exist."

"What do you mean? Only that you haven't met her or that you're beyond all measure fastidious?"

What I meant was that I had an invincible repugnance to the idea of marrying anybody, and then, as Vi pressed me to be more explicit, wondering what on earth could have led me to assume so unusual an attitude, it came to me on a sudden that there was no longer any valid reason why I should not tell her. So I told her briefly, unemotionally, speaking of it all in the past tense, as

beseemed me after that long lapse of years, and saying how glad I felt that it was at last possible for me to speak like that. She raised her hands to her temples, frowning, as if in pain.

"Oh, Peter," she murmured, "I am so sorry! Why didn't you say this long ago?"

"I think I did," I answered. "Not in actual words; still surely you knew!"

She made a rather vehement gesture of denial. "No, I didn't. I knew that you had a sort of feeling . . . I knew that you didn't like my marrying your brother. But you never behaved as if . . . And then—you must forgive me for raking it up—there was that affair with the actress, which seemed to me at the time to show that you weren't quite what I had thought you were."

I would have given a good deal to be able to tell her that I had had no affair with any actress; but, as that could not be, I held my peace, and she resumed :

"We were great friends—with a touch of sentimentality in our friendship, if you like—but honestly I thought I cared more for you than you did for me. I suppose what *you* thought was that I had fooled you and deceived you just for fun."

"No," I answered, "I didn't think that. I may have thought that I had been fool enough to deceive myself, that was all. It doesn't matter now."

"Oh, it *does* matter, Peter!" she sighed; "even

now it matters. Even now that I am a faded, ugly invalid."

"Of course it does in one way," I agreed ; "you misunderstand me. I only meant that my behaviour of eight years ago doesn't matter now ; I didn't mean that any change in you, inward or outward, could change my love of eight years ago and to-day, which is a part of myself and will be as long as I live. Now do you see why I can't marry and why I don't want to stay in England ?"

I hardly expected her to see ; I expected her to make the customary sensible representations. But she was too honest and too wise for that. Recognising that I was the former, though I might not be the latter, she saw that it would be better for me to return to Waroomba, and only deplored the necessity for my departure. We were talking to one another with such absolute candour (how rare are the moments when two mortals can talk together with absolute candour !) that I did not contradict her when she accused herself of having done all she knew to make me love her. I could, however, truly reply that in so doing she had introduced me to happiness.

"But I made you unhappy too," she rejoined. "I had wit enough to realise that ; why hadn't I the wit to realise more ? I was no better than a silly, vulgar housemaid, making eyes at the footman and furious with him if he doesn't respond. I was furious with you because you didn't respond ;

that's the humiliating fact. Then Arthur came, and —yes, I fell a victim to him."

" Of course," said I.

" Why of course ? Because he is so fascinating ? Well, that may have been the reason—if one must give a reason."

She was silent for a short space, half closing her eyes and tapping her chin with her slim fingers. Whether or not she was tempted to say anything further about Arthur I cannot tell ; but I imagine that, if so, her loyalty would not let her. To what remote ancestor or ancestress in this country of mixed blood could Vi have been a throw-back ? Her parents had been common enough ; but in her it always seemed to me that there was a visible strain of nobility.

" Things happen to us," she resumed presently, with a slight laugh ; " I don't know what puts it into our heads that we can make them happen or prevent their happening."

I said I should be sorry to think that there was no such thing as free will ; whereat she laughed again.

" You might have some difficulty in proving that there is such a thing," she observed. " It's true that nobody can prove the contrary ; so we are at least free to believe what we please. Personally, I have a leaning towards the whitewash of pre-destination. Either way, it's clear that we have no power over what's past and gone."

The rest of our conversation related chiefly to

those best days of my life during which I had been wont to go over and see her at Hallacombe. I liked to be reminded of them, and so, I gladly and gratefully perceived, did she. More than once I got up to go ; but she made me sit down again, saying that, as this might be our last talk (it turned out to be the last time that I was to see her in private), we must make the most of it. When it became evident that she was at the end of her strength, she said :

“ Peter, I want you to write to me sometimes from Australia. If I don’t answer at once you’ll know that it’s because I’m ill, not because I want to be tantalising, as I did once upon a time. And, Peter dear, always remember this : nobody in the world cares for you more than I do. There !—now go.”

CHAPTER XVII

A FRACTURE AND A UNION

I REMEMBER that I left Chivenham feeling glad and relieved that Vi knew all—which was, perhaps, rather stupid of me. I did not realise, as she, with her quicker wit, doubtless did, that such a talk as was just over could neither be renewed nor ignored. I had, in short, made future confidential talks impossible, and she wisely took care that there should be none. I saw her again many times before I sailed, but always in the company of other people; and a letter from Miss Wardrop, containing intelligence which did not surprise me, rendered it advisable that I should expedite my departure. Jack's conduct, it appeared, had been exemplary until—it had abruptly and uproariously become the reverse. He had quarrelled with and terrorised the entire establishment; he had half killed a stockman, who had sworn to have the law of him and had with difficulty been induced to accept pecuniary compensation; worst of all, he had actually threatened his niece with personal violence; so that, although at the time of writing he was once more sober and abjectly penitent, the

poor girl had naturally lost confidence in him and in herself. She confessed as much, and, notwithstanding her entreaties that I would not dream of altering my plans on her account, she evidently hoped that I should.

Thus it came to pass that quitting England in the autumn I reached Waroomba in early summer, to be greeted by a shamefaced partner who had not a word to say for himself, except that he had "sworn off." As to how far that heroic step was likely to carry him I may have had my doubts ; but I felt warranted by experience in assuring his niece that she need fear no recurrence of his outbreak while I was about the place. Should he, after a time, announce his intention of going to Brisbane on business, he would have to go, and Brisbane's blood must be upon its own head ; but I made bold to undertake that with us he would remain the docile, kindly creature whom we knew. He did not belie my promise ; nor, poor fellow, did he forget how lamentably he had broken his own. In Dora's presence he was like a whipped hound, maintaining his subservient demeanour long after she had recovered from and pardoned the severe scare that he had given her.

"It's just because he's so good and meek that I'm frightened of him, Mr. Vaux," said she. "I feel as if there were two of him in one skin, and, oh dear!—if you had seen the other when the fit was on him, you'd have thought he was possessed

of seven devils. He can't have any will at all!"

Jack must have had a pretty strong will to quench his thirst for weeks upon pure water, as he did. It was thirsty weather too ; for the great heats came upon us in advance of their due time that year, stock, horses and men suffering in consequence, though the high level on which we dwelt conferred a relative immunity upon us. Personally I was put to some inconvenience by the circumstance that there was nothing comfortable for me to ride, all my sober beasts being in physic ; so that I had to make the best of a big black mare whom Jack called quiet and whom Miss Dora had often ridden in a snaffle. My hands, I am afraid, are heavy, and it was very likely on that account that the mare and I could not hit it off together. At any rate, she did not like me and was perpetually trying to get rid of me by means of sudden bucks and bounds. She did not manage to put me down ; but she did succeed in tiring me and making me hot, besides giving me that sensation of incapacity which is so annoying in one's dealings with any living creature, equine or human. As we had to spend a certain number of hours together every day, I did what in me lay to propitiate her ; yet I was well aware that nothing could avail to conquer her prejudice against me.

I was approaching home one evening, after a long, sultry day which had wearied both her and me, when I paused to watch some of our hands

cutting, or rather hauling, down a red gum which had long been ringbarked. All of a sudden the great tree descended with a crash, and the mare, naturally, jumped almost out of her skin. I had let the reins drop on her neck, and now I snatched at them too hastily, with the result that she reared straight up. I twitched my right foot out of the stirrup and tried not to touch her mouth ; but I daresay I did, for back she came, and the next thing I knew was that she and I had emulated the red gum. By good luck, she did not quite roll over me, though she gave me a nasty squeeze ; but when she had scrambled up and when I attempted to follow suit, it became painfully apparent to me that I should not walk again for some time to come.

Jack said wonderingly afterwards that he had never heard of such a thing as a man's breaking his leg in that way. I am sure he would not have broken his ; but no doubt I have special ingenuities. To cut a long story short, I had not only a fractured leg but a couple of fractured ribs to keep it company, which was a sorry plight to be in at our distance from surgical aid. A young man who had once been a medical student was sent for in hot haste from a comparatively neighbouring station, and he did what he could for me with the utmost good will, but unfortunately with so little dexterity that when a more competent operator arrived from Brisbane it was found necessary to break the injured limb once more, as a preliminary to setting it properly.

This was accordingly done, and for two interminable, sweltering months I lay on my back, wondering sometimes whether life under such conditions was worth while. Of Jack's inexhaustible goodness and of the admirable nursing that I received from his niece I cannot think now with undimmed eyes. For divers reasons, I am not in a position to call Jack and Dora Wardrop saints or angels ; but they might have broken every law of the Decalogue or the Statute Book and I should none the less remain their debtor. I do so remain ; for I never contrived to discharge the debt. Perhaps, were I put upon my trial, I might plead with some show of plausibility that I endeavoured to discharge it ; but such pleas are of no avail when one's own implacable conscience occupies the judgment seat.

If Dora was not an angel, she was the best substitute for one that ever hovered about a sick man's bed, and if she had had no professional training, all I can say is that she needed none. She knew by intuition just what to do and just how to do it ; she talked to me when I wanted to talk and dropped silent the moment she saw that I was tired ; she read to me by the hour together, though I am afraid that the books for which I asked bored her more than a little. Later we used to play chess, and I daresay that bored her too ; but she would not admit that it did.

“ What nonsense ! ” she would cry, laughing. “ Why, don't you see how interested I am ? I'd

give my eyes to beat you ; only I know I never shall.”

She had bright, kind eyes, which said all manner of consoling things to a helpless fellow-creature. I became very fond of the girl—as indeed I should have been a brute if I had not—and I divined that she had the affection for me which it is natural to feel for those upon whom one has showered benefits. Jack, who had always—save for that one unhappy lapse—been her very humble slave, could not find language strong enough to express his admiration of her.

“ It’s my belief, Peter,” said he solemnly, “ that but for that young woman you’d have been a goner. A pretty sort of a nurse *I* should have made for you ! ”

“ Far be it from me to depreciate Miss Dora,” I answered ; “ but I can’t allow you to depreciate yourself either. Whose arms lifted me up over and over again, without hurting me, when nobody else could ? Who wouldn’t let anybody else cook my food ? ”

“ It’s true that I can cook a bit,” Jack conceded, “ and my arms may have come in useful at times ; but, bless your soul ! you might as well try to make a race between a dray-horse and a thoroughbred as compare me to Dora. Now I’ll tell you what I’m going to do. I’ve saved up a goodish pile of money, and I’m going to buy that girl a diamond necklace. Or should you think she’d sooner have pearls ? ”

I said he had better ask her. What shape my own thank-offering was to take it was not easy to see ; but I did not think that a gift of jewellery would quite meet the case. Very likely the perspicacious reader could have told me how respect for the best traditions rendered it well-nigh incumbent upon me to act. One hears that a girl has nursed a man devotedly through a long illness and one says in an off-hand way that of course they fell in love with one another, and what else could be expected ? But in actual life those who are the sport of well-worn romantic situations often fail to recognise them as such, and for my part, if anybody had made the above suggestion to me, I should have been much amused. A less likely man to excite a romantic passion than myself would, I imagine, have been hard to find ; added to which I was Dora's senior by a dozen well-rung years. I should have said that there was about as much chance of her losing her heart to our burly, red-bearded overseer as to me. But who can account for the vagaries of human hearts or the illusions of human brains ?

It was soon after I had begun to hobble about tentatively on crutches that Dora informed me, to my astonishment and consternation, of her intention to desert us. She could easily earn a living in Sydney or Melbourne, she declared, and no doubt Uncle Jack would give her a start. Stay at Waroomba, now that I no longer needed a nurse, she could not. Then, when I dull-wittedly insisted upon being

given reasons, she burst all of a sudden into tears, and then she said things which even my dull wits could not misinterpret.

It was no small shock ; and the worst of it was that, without bringing any accusation against me, she made me feel horribly guilty. I saw, when sundry incidents of my illness were recalled to me, that I had more than once committed what in a younger man might have been accounted im-prudences ; I saw how excusably what I had meant for mere natural expressions of gratitude had been construed in quite another sense. What was I to do ? I believe I did the right thing—at any rate, it was the straightforward thing—in telling Dora the truth ; for I hoped and thought that hearing it would cure her of an aberration which I could not help regarding as born of the circumstances and of our common solitude in those wilds. But she was not affected as I had assumed that she would be. She said she had felt sure that “ there was somebody ” and that the letters which I had not read to her (I had read my mother’s and Cicely’s) had come from that somebody ; but the news that Vi was my brother’s wife seemed, oddly enough, to give her comfort. One cannot, she implied, go on being in love with one’s sister-in-law.

“ Not that it makes any difference,” she hastened to add. “ If there had been no Mrs. Arthur Vaux in the world, you still couldn’t have thought of me in the way that I was crazy enough to imagine for a

time that you did. You are a gentleman by birth, and you never forget it ; I am—what I am. Even in this democratic country you couldn't help looking down upon me if you tried. It has been all my fault, not a bit yours.” She sighed and concluded : “ I’m glad you know, though I’m sorry I had to tell you—if you understand. Only I must go away, you see. But you won’t tell Uncle Jack why I’m going, will you ? ”

With that she hurried out of the room, leaving a sorely perplexed and contrite man to discern the paths of duty and expediency as best he might. As to the former, I could not think that it was, strictly speaking, my duty to marry Dora Wardrop. If I had been an ass, I had been an innocent one, and I did feel—absurdly, if anyone likes to say so—that the difference in social station which she had made me wince by mentioning was a genuine barrier. But when it came to expediency, all the weight of argument dropped into the other scale. How could I drive the poor girl away from the only home that she had ? Why should I refuse what would in all probability be the only chance I should ever get of making a home for myself ? Those very letters of Vi’s had been full of exhortations to matrimony as much the best thing for me. Then there was Jack to be considered. If anything could convert Jack into a permanent abstainer, it would be the domesticity with which we should be able to provide him. Finally, it was more and more borne in upon

me that I was in Queensland for good and all. Even if my people did not hail the Wardrop alliance with enthusiasm, they would be reconciled to it by all those intervening leagues of salt water.

The upshot of the above reflections was that I beckoned Dora out on to the verandah that evening and asked her to be my wife. I said that if she would take me, knowing what I had to offer and what I could not, I would do my utmost to make her life happy. I remember that I was rather prolix out there in the fragrant twilight—rather unnecessarily so ; for she, on her side, had no hesitation at all. I think, poor dear, she had very great confidence in her ability to make my life happy, and I think that at the time that may have been the prime consideration with her. A good many women, perhaps, are similarly actuated when they marry.

Jack, on hearing what we had to tell him, woke the echoes far and wide with a wild whoop of joy. He observed that, as there was only one man alive good enough for Dora and only one woman good enough for me, our union must be pronounced a masterstroke on the part of Providence. I believe he would have liked us to set forth for Brisbane and the Registry Office the very next day, and the delay necessitated by my lameness caused him evident anxiety. Whether he was afraid that I should limp off into the bush and never be heard of again or that Dora would change her mind I don't know ; but he was uneasy and impatient until we all

betook ourselves to the capital some weeks afterwards, and then it was my turn to be anxious. However, I wronged my poor friend, whose conduct was exemplary throughout a somewhat protracted sojourn at Brisbane and who would not even empty a glass of champagne in our honour after the wedding.

We saw him started on the return journey to Waroomba before we embarked for New Zealand, where, by Dora's wish, we spent the honeymoon in exquisite scenery and invigorating mountain air. I wonder why it all seems so far away to me now—so much farther away than events which preceded it by many years. Almost I am tempted to doubt whether it ever actually happened, so shadowy and unreal does it appear when I try to throw myself back into it. I suppose I must have been happy after a fashion ; I am sure I was contented, and I hope (without being equally sure) that I looked so. Dora was extraordinarily good to me. Thoughtful she had always been, and, now that I belonged to her, she studied every wish and fancy of mine in a manner that would have shamed me if I had not seen that she found pleasure in it. What could I do for her in return ? Little enough, I am afraid. Honestly I think that I did what was possible ; honestly I can say that if what she wanted was a husband who appreciated her, she had an appreciative husband. Upon the whole, it was—it must have been—a pleasant time ; yet I have to

confess that I was very, very glad to get back to Waroomba and regular daily work.

Happiness is well enough when one can have it ; but I doubt whether there is a great deal of it to be had in this world by anybody, and it must always be a precarious blessing, whereas work is an assured one, so long as a man retains his faculties and the use of his limbs. Having recovered the use of mine, I longed to resume the daily round which brings restful fatigue and sleep. Moreover, it was, to tell the truth, high time for us to return. That poor dear Jack's fortitude should have given way during our absence was not surprising. I have said enough about his one failing and do not wish to say more, except that what I heard and what he himself wrote to me determined me never voluntarily to lose sight of him again.

CHAPTER XVIII

DORA'S MALADY AND ITS CURE

MY marriage must have appeared such a precipitate affair to my good people at home, who had scarcely heard of its imminence before it had taken place, that they might well have been pardoned for looking askance at it. But they did not. Dora's careful nursing of me may have won their hearts, or perhaps they were too sensible, as well as too kind, to quarrel with an accomplished fact ; in any case their letters were of a nature which enabled me to hand them over to my wife for perusal. Strange to say, Vi, who had so insistently advocated my marrying, did not seem to be altogether pleased with me for having obeyed orders. She sent us a beautiful wedding present, accompanying it with a gracefully worded letter, which also could be shown to my wife and could have been shown to anybody else ; but her tone was not quite what it had been, and subsequent replies to my long missives grew shorter and rarer until they ceased altogether. Alas ! there was a sad reason for that—the reason which she had foreseen and of which I had been forewarned. I heard from

Cicely that her ailment showed no sign of diminishing, and, as time went on, it came to be called by its true name of creeping paralysis. All manner of treatments, Cicely wrote, had been tried and would continue to be tried ; but the doctors, while denying that her life was threatened, held out little hope of her ever being able to walk again.

This, as will be easily understood, was a sorrow which I preferred to keep to myself. I dealt in similar fashion with other troubles and anxieties, relating chiefly to Arthur's mode of life, and Dora sometimes reproached me with being secretive. Well, she was not the first person to do that ; but I fear that she might fairly have been the first to accuse me (although she did not) of selfishness into the bargain. That I was unconsciously selfish is too poor an excuse to be worth pleading. The fact was that I had plenty to do, and I chose to take it for granted that she was in the like case. Whenever I saw her she was busy ; for our increasing affluence resulted in an ever-increasing establishment, and the household duties which she so admirably discharged gave her occupation for a good part of each day. Nevertheless, there must have been many long, solitary hours when Jack and I were miles away and when she had no soul with whom to exchange a word. The sameness of our existence, which caused weeks and months and ultimately years to glide away with smooth imperceptibility for me, could not but dishearten a woman who was sociable

by nature and whose youth had not yet passed its prime. That we had no children was a subject of outspoken regret to Jack, and possibly Dora also may have felt it as a disappointment ; but she did not say so, nor, I own to my shame, did the notion that she could be nursing a grievance of any kind enter into my head. No doubt I was exasperatingly obtuse, for it was in accents almost of despair that she asked me, while we were watching the sunset glow from the verandah one evening :

“ Peter, is this to go on for ever ? ”

I turned and looked at her face, which for the first time struck me as pinched and wistful. “ Nothing will go on for ever,” I answered ; “ but, for my own part, I shouldn’t mind going on at Waroomba until I died. We’ll be off, though, if you’re tired of it.”

“ Oh, I didn’t mean that,” she protested, with a touch of impatience. “ Of course you can’t dissolve your partnership with Uncle Jack, and I shouldn’t so much dislike Waroomba if only I knew that I could get quite away every now and then. It’s the having nothing to look forward to that’s so deadly ! . . . and the world outside spinning along all the time, and things happening ! . . . Sometimes I feel as if I were nailed down alive in my coffin ! I haven’t complained, have I ? I hate complaining now ; only I do believe that, unless I get a change, I shall go mad ! ”

At my first remorseful words she broke out into

sobs, begging me not to speak kindly to her, as she could not bear it. It was evident that her nerves were completely unstrung and that the only thing to be done was to give prompt effect to her very reasonable wish. The difficulty was that Jack and I could not take leave of absence simultaneously, and, for reasons which I need not reiterate, I disliked the idea of leaving him at Waroomba all by himself. Eventually it was decided that he should escort Dora to Melbourne (as it appeared that she had a fancy for returning thither), and that he should remain there in charge of her until I relieved him. The plan was not in all respects an ideal one; but I was confronted with an insoluble variant upon the old dilemma of the fox, the goose and the basket of cabbages. I had to make the best I could of it, and one comfort was that Dora's spirits rose rapidly at the prospect of what did not sound to me like a specially exhilarating jaunt.

"I shall be so much better by the time you join us, Peter, that you won't know me again," she predicted.

My hope was that she might be so much better by then as to warrant our all returning home together; but I judged it prudent to say nothing about that. Jack, after making me a solemn, unsolicited promise that, be the temptations of Melbourne what they might, he would withstand them, owned that, for his part, he would not be sorry to "stretch himself a bit"—a figure of speech which struck me as

strangely inapposite—but was distressed at the thought of my loneliness.

“Why, Uncle Jack,” cried Dora, “he’ll just love it! If there’s anybody in this world who never bores Peter Vaux, it’s Peter Vaux.”

I suppose there may have been some truth in that. It is true, at all events, that I can endure large doses of my own company, coupled with that of writers, living and dead, whom I have never beheld in the flesh. On stepping ashore at Pinkemba from the steamer which was to convey Dora and Jack to their destination I had, I confess, a certain sense of restored freedom which was not incompatible, I hope, with my affection for them both. Since Oxford I had read scarcely at all in any serious fashion; but there cannot be many people who find greater joy in indiscriminate, superficial reading than I do, and many a neglected friend of mine stood dustily waiting for me on the Waroomba shelves. For the rest, if my evenings were now at my own disposal, the daylight hours were not. Jack being away, I had to work double tides, and the mare who had broken my leg for me was made to use her own legs to an extent which rendered her accommodatingly passive and pensive.

It is a great blessing—I am not sure that it isn’t the greatest of earthly blessings—to be busy all day and thoroughly fagged when bedtime comes. I could hardly believe that six weeks had slipped away when Jack wrote to say that I was wanted to

relieve guard. He had, of course, written before that, and so had Dora, both of them reporting that the Melbourne prescription was working wonders. Although it was getting on for four years since Dora's sojourn in that city had been terminated by her father's tragic death, she had found certain old friends to welcome her and appeared to have made many new ones. Jack also had foregathered with sundry cronies and had incidentally done some good strokes of business. He said, however, that he had now had about enough of town life, adding :

" Besides which, Peter, I don't know but what it's as well for the husband of a handsome young wife to let folks see he's there. Not that Dora isn't perfectly all right, whether you're there or not, bless her!—only you know what these young sparks are. Between you and me, I've had to give some of them a hint to behave. Shows what a good sheep-dog I am, eh? "

This intimation of my worthy partner's vigilance did not inspire me with much apprehension of Melbourne dogs or wolves; for Dora, as I had heard from her own lips, was not without such experience of the world as the circumstances might require, and I did not doubt her capacity to take care of herself. Still my marital duties were manifest; so I answered that the next coasting steamer south should have me for a passenger.

Cities like Melbourne, which, having no history, possess no distinctive character, never say a great

deal to me ; though Dora's enthusiasm for a place so lavish in its hospitality was comprehensible enough. When I reached the hotel where Jack and she had taken up their quarters, she was in the act of starting for a garden-party. She was due at a dance that night, she told me, and then she exhibited a list of future engagements at the sight whereof I daresay my long face grew rather longer.

"Oh, you needn't come with me unless you like," said she ; "I can't and don't expect you to be such a hero as Uncle Jack has been."

"Let me be a martyr then," I answered. "I shall be a willing one, I assure you."

I was in truth quite willing to take my turn at the social treadmill, so glad was I to see the colour restored to her cheeks and the sparkle to her eyes. I happened to know the Governor of Victoria, and I had written to him, asking him to show my wife some kindness ; but the request, it appeared, had borne no fruit, and Dora's intercourse with Government House had begun and ended on the day when she and her uncle had inscribed their names in the visitors' book. I surmised—rightly, as I afterwards found out—that the name of Wardrop might not be precisely a passport to favour ; all the same, I should have thought that the Governor of a democratic colony would have seen the absurdity of trying to be exclusive, and I certainly was not prepared to receive, a few days after my arrival at Melbourne, an invitation to dine at Government

House, addressed to myself alone. Thinking this impertinent (as indeed it was), I briefly excused myself, and no further gubernatorial notice was vouchsafed to us. Dora said she didn't care a rap ; she had as many friends as she wanted. Perhaps she did care a little—I acknowledge that I did—but friends she undoubtedly had in plenty. I was introduced to them all, and I suppose I ought not to disparage them after having eaten their salt ; yet the fact is that they were not very nice people. The nice people, I suspect, either took their cue from Government House or were unable to forget that Mrs. Vaux was Harry Wardrop's daughter. For instances of similar injustice one need not travel as far as the Antipodes.

The unfortunate thing was not that I disliked Dora's friends, but that they did not like me. They said (for their remarks were faithfully reported to me) that I "gave myself airs," which is an absolutely fatal reputation to acquire in Australia. It is quite easily acquired and is only too likely to be substantiated by the hapless culprit himself, who, knowing what is anticipated of him, is as certain to fulfil anticipation as a billiard player would be to miss his stroke if told at the last moment that he was not going to score. Never in my life have I given myself airs or thought of doing such a thing ; but constitutional shyness, unluckily, answers all the purpose. Thus it was that I was not disinclined to shirk divers entertainments from which Dora

assured me that I should not be missed. She herself was so plainly bent upon not missing those appointed to take place at distant dates that I had not the heart to name even an approximate one for our return home. Nor could I detain Jack, who was growing restless. I was fain to let him go and to hope for the best.

Had it not been for my reluctance to let him out of my sight, I really should not have minded staying on where I was ; for little as dances, picnics and theatre parties appealed to me, I was able to derive a good deal of vicarious pleasure from Dora's frank enjoyment of them. She was as popular as she deserved to be, and if a few of the younger men hovered a trifle too assiduously around her, she seemed quite competent to keep them in their proper places. Some of them came to dine with us occasionally, and to one of them, a tall, broad-shouldered young fellow, named Pritchard, I took rather a fancy. My sentiments, it is true, were not reciprocated—indeed, I gathered from certain *obiter dicta* of his that he set me down as a crabbed, unsympathetic husband—but I did not care enough about him to resent that, and, as he could talk intelligently upon the subject of horses and stock, we had something in common.

“Peter,” said Dora one morning, “the Bournes want us to stay three days with them in their cottage at Macedon. I told them that I should be delighted, but that I was afraid you wouldn’t be,

because you hate so to be away on mail day. Wasn't that thoughtful of me?"

"It was, my dear," I answered, "and it had the additional merit of strict veracity. With all respect for Mr. and Mrs. Bourne and the rest of the Macedon party, I do prefer my home letters to their company."

"Of course you do," she rejoined, with something between a laugh and a sigh. "Your heart isn't here; it never has been."

My heart was where it had always been, where it always would be and where, so far as I could see, my body would never follow it. If this was rather hard upon my wife—I don't say it was not—the hardship was unalterable by me. So many things, and even a few people, are unalterable! Nevertheless, I made some good resolutions that night; for my conscience told me that if I had been materially kind to Dora, I had not been demonstratively affectionate, and it was beginning to dawn upon me that indulgent indifference, or the appearance of it, may present itself to the average woman as a form of cruelty. Then, the next morning, came my English letters, forwarded from Waroomba, and drove all remembrance of Dora out of my mind.

For the news which those letters brought me was worse than the very worst that I could have dreaded. Both my mother and Cicely wrote, and both of them used almost exactly the same words. They were sure I should be grieved, but did not think I

should be much surprised, to hear that our dear Vi's trials and sufferings were over. The end had come with little warning. She had seemed to be in her usual condition until, one afternoon, she had had a succession of fainting fits which had frightened the nurse into sending for Cicely. She had rallied for a short time, then had relapsed into unconsciousness and had ceased to breathe without pain or struggle.

"She scarcely spoke at all," Cicely told me, "but she said, 'My love to Peter when you write.' I thought you would like to know."

Like to know ! Yes, indeed, if anything could have gladdened me in that most bitter moment, it would have been her remembrance of me under the shadow of death. But the bitterness was very great. Possibly it ought not to have been, seeing that I had accepted the improbability of my ever beholding her face again and that I had borne to hear of the permanent helplessness to which she had been relegated. I suppose I must have cherished hopes without being aware of them ; assuredly I had not realised that her life might be in jeopardy. The doctors had so often affirmed that it was not. What can I say ? There are sorrows of which it must remain for ever impossible to speak, and there are some the nature of which one would not know how to explain to another living being, even if one wished to do so.

I recollect that I wandered at random through the streets of Melbourne, sometimes fancying that the

passers-by eyed me inquisitively, sometimes wondering in a dull way at their cold unconcern. That by chance I was alone was one small mercy. Of course, on Dora's return I should have to tell her of a bereavement which would interfere (or wouldn't it, perhaps ?) with her social pledges ; but I resolved to do so in such a manner as to discourage comment. An envelope addressed in her handwriting was brought to me on the following morning. I opened it listlessly, and noticed, with faint, incurious surprise, that it was dated from Sandhurst, not from Macedon. This was her letter :

" DEAR PETER,

" I am here with Walter Pritchard, who loves me and will marry me as soon as I am free. Perhaps you will be startled or shocked or both, but I really cannot think that you will be distressed. Peter, I *could* not have gone back to that awful life at Waroomba with you ! I am not complaining ; it was easy to see that you never noticed how awful it was or how I was starved for want of just a little love. Perhaps, if you had—but you did not notice anything much and me least of all—you would have tried to manage the impossible, for you always mean well. Only it is quite impossible for any woman to be contented when she knows that she is neither loved nor needed. From the first you looked down upon me. You were too much of a gentleman to show it in any of the usual ways ;

but you showed it in your own way, which came to the same thing. Of course our marriage was a great blunder—*my* blunder more than yours. I don't blame you for what you couldn't help, and I hope you will be fair and generous enough not to blame me. In any case, you are rid of me, which ought to lessen your displeasure, if you feel any. I suppose there will be no trouble about the divorce, as the suit will be undefended.

“DORA.

“I am afraid Uncle Jack will be angry. Please thank him for all his goodness and say I am truly sorry to desert *him*. ”

CHAPTER XIX

FAREWELL TO WAROOMBA

“ **D**ASHED if I can make head or tail of you, Peter ! ” exclaimed Jack despairingly.

“ Tail’s what it sounds to me as if you wanted to make of yourself ; but that won’t wash. If it isn’t a case of turning tail—and after having lived with you all these years, I know you’re no coward—what in thunder is it ? ”

“ Try resignation,” I suggested.

But he would not hear of such a thing. He said, in language too powerful to be reproduced *verbatim*, that there are circumstances under which a man has no right to be resigned, and insults which, if he pretends to be a man at all, he simply cannot take lying down.

We were sitting on the verandah at Waroomba, whither I had just returned with my tidings. Jack’s inability to comprehend my unimpassioned attitude was, of course, not surprising ; for his ideas were those of his numerous congeners. No very rigid upholder of morality in the abstract, he was nevertheless quite clear that when a man runs away with your wife, the only thing to be done is to

run after him and shoot him. Similarly, while admitting that other people's womankind may stray from the path of virtue and remain more or less pardonable, he could not deem you entitled to extend any leniency to your own. Dora, having disgraced me and him, must look for neither mercy nor pity. I, at all events, was not the proper person to make excuses for her. However, I had to go on making them.

" You see, Jack," I observed, " every word in that letter of hers is true, and she might have made more of her wrongs if she had chosen. She bore what I now see must have been purgatory to her as long as she could ; then she broke down, just as you and I should break down if we were tried beyond endurance, and when a way of escape offered itself, she jumped at it. I only hope it will prove a smooth and happy way for her. Why should I shoot or thrash or otherwise maltreat young Pritchard ? Dora would tell you that he hasn't injured me and that he has done her an immense service."

" Well," grumbled Jack, clasping his bony hands behind his head and tilting his hat over his nose, " I can't make it out !—can't make it out a bit ! I should have said I'd never seen a happier couple than you two. What you mean by his having done Dora an immense service I'm sure I don't know."

It might have been a little difficult to explain in terms likely to carry conviction ; so I did not make

the attempt. I only remarked that the last thing I desired was to punish either of the fugitives.

"Aren't we going to do anything, then?" asked Jack wonderingly.

"Nothing," I answered. "That is, I am going to do something—it's the least and the most I can do—by applying for a divorce. Then she and Pritchard can be married, and I daresay Melbourne won't turn its back upon them. Her friends there, I imagine, will say that I alone was in fault, and I don't know that her friends will be far wrong."

"You'll be inviting that precious pair to come and pay us a visit here next!" groaned Jack.

What he really thought of me I never ascertained; probably he was altogether at a loss. But he knew, or believed he knew, what to think of Dora, whose name he afterwards begged me as a favour not to mention to him again. That parting message of hers to him, which had impressed me as pathetic, he found merely impudent. She had told him a heap of lies, he said, and it was not in his character to forgive anybody who had done that.

His character had some contradictions of a surface kind, but no complexities. Black being black for him and white white, he judged himself and others accordingly. A Brisbane horse-dealer said once to me that if Jack Wardrop didn't trust you, he was the ugliest customer alive, but that if he did, he couldn't do enough for you, and that was very true. I am sure the good fellow would have done anything in

the world for me. Seeing that I was unhappy (though, of course, he did not know why I was or how little Dora had to say to my unhappiness), he employed every transparent stratagem that he could hit upon to revive my spirits, and he certainly did manage to make me laugh, which was a visible joy and triumph to him. When those wretched divorce proceedings had to be gone through, he insisted upon accompanying me and sitting beside me in Court, with an air of general challenge, as of a big dog who intends to protect his master against all comers. Fortunately, the affair was soon disposed of, and on our return to Waroomba we fell back mechanically—perhaps not unwillingly—into the old habits and manner of life which had preceded my marriage.

Jack unselfishly urged me to give myself another holiday in England, where I was said to be wanted by my mother and Cicely and also, according to the latter, by Arthur. I don't think they any of them greatly regretted my matrimonial *fiasco*—why should they?—still they assumed that it must be a source of regret to me, and they counselled a complete change. I did not myself feel that I required one. My wounds were too recent to bear even the tenderest touch, and besides, I could not see my way to forsake Jack. Sometimes now I wonder what made me so fond of dear old Jack; though it may be more wonderful that he should have been fond of me. There was not any sort of bond between

us, save the love of horses, which I had in a far less degree than he, and the circumstance of our long association ; we did not talk together a great deal, and when we did, it was mostly about trivialities. Yet I had a feeling for him that I have never had for any other man, and I like to think that he had something of the same kind for me.

At the time of which I am writing our chief topic of conversation was the Boer war, which had just broken out, and the initial checks sustained by the British arms. Neither of us thought much of those early reverses, which we ascribed to the traditional unreadiness of our country ; but when they were followed by sheer disasters, and when Australia, like the other outlying portions of the Empire, had begun to call out contingents for service in South Africa, one of us became fidgety. I pretended not to know what Jack had in his mind, and he, conscious of my mute, futile opposition, limited himself to what he doubtless considered gentle and discreet hints. In other words, he soon forced me to quit cover and come out into the open.

“ Fine sport for you to go larking off to the wars,” said I, meanly hitting him below the belt ; “ but what about me, planted here, without a soul to preserve me from suicide ? ”

“ Ah, that’s just it ! ” sighed Jack disconsolately.

“ Certainly,” I went on, “ you proposed my going to England and leaving you ; but I didn’t do it, please remember. I wasn’t so inhuman.”

Jack shifted uneasily in his saddle. We were jogging homewards at sundown beneath a coppery sky, and we may both have been a trifle irritable, for it was near midsummer and desperately hot. But although underlings were wont to give my partner a wide berth when he drew his brows together, as he did now, he was never quarrelsome with me.

"You see," said he hesitatingly and apologetically, "it's pretty nearly . . . the way I look at it . . . pretty nearly a case of *must*! I shall feel a beast if I turn my back on you; but if I stop here while those fellows go and fight, I shall feel I'm a cur!"

"So you think it's all right that I should feel like a cur," I observed. "You don't suggest my going with you, I notice."

His face brightened up at that. "Come along!" he cried eagerly. "Peter, old man, come along!"

But I had to shake my head. "You know as well as I do," I returned, "that one of us is bound to stay here, unless we decide to sell up everything. And that can't be done in a moment."

With a long sigh, he assented to what could not be denied. "I expect I'll have to drop it," he murmured, in deep dejection.

"Oh, go to South Africa and be hanged to you!" I exclaimed, laughing. "You silly old ass, do you suppose I didn't know you were going? Of course you're going, and I should be quite ashamed of you if you weren't."

Like the great overgrown schoolboy that he was, Jack let out a shout of joy and made his horse break into a gallop. I was much too hot to imitate him ; so I waited while he described a wide circle and returned to me, bubbling over with gratitude. His absence, he assured me, would not be a protracted one ; the war would speedily be brought to an end when it began to be conducted upon principles not familiar to Aldershot generals. "We shall round those beggars up and have them surrendering before they know where they are," he predicted.

"Let us hope so," said I. "Don't get yourself killed, that's all."

"Well, I'm not going to stand up on the skyline and oblige them with a target," he answered ; "but as for getting killed, that's as may be. We've all got to die, you know, and the man who is wiped out in a minute, instead of tossing and gasping for weeks in bed, is a devilish lucky chap, in my opinion. I only say this so that you shouldn't be too sorry for me in case I do get knocked over ; it's a hundred to one I don't."

I suppose he was too jubilant (such a load off his troubled breast, poor fellow !) to endure my ambling pace ; for presently he cantered on ahead, and I watched him while he lessened in the lessening light, a splendid specimen of muscular humanity, splendidly mounted. Then on a sudden he dipped out of sight, and the next moment I saw his riderless horse galloping off at full speed. I was not

flustered ; I knew at once what had happened. The horse had put his foot in a hole, and Jack, pitching head first upon the hard, parched ground, had been stunned. Stunned he must be, or he would not have let his horse get away ; but he was much too tough and fit to have taken any serious hurt. So I said to myself as I cantered up to the spot where I came upon him, lying prone, with his arms flung wide. Then indeed my heart stood still, for I did not like the posture in which he had fallen. Dismounting hastily, I bent over him and lifted his body a little—lifted it enough to recognise that it was only a body and that Jack Wardrop was only a memory. His neck was broken. He must have been riding carelessly, with his chin up, as he sometimes did.

One wonders—it is as vain to wonder as it is impossible to help wondering—why these cruel, stupid, incongruous tragedies take place. Pious folks are ready with replies of an *à priori* order ; but these can only be convincing upon the hypothesis that whatever is is right, and I am not, for my part, able to accept that hypothesis. It does not console me in the least to be told that had poor Jack Wardrop's life been prolonged, he might have encountered all manner of adversities. Of course he might ; but a charitable offer to knock such kind comforters on the head, lest a worse fate should befall them, will always be declined with vivacity. I possessed the consolation that my friend's last words had been

spoken in praise of sudden death. It was not much of a consolation ; still, since no other was imaginable by me, I had to make what I could of it.

I had, besides, to make what I could of my own life —thus abruptly disintegrated by a mishap which in nine cases out of ten would have produced nothing more than a shaking and a laugh. To say that from the bottom of my heart I wished that the mishap had overtaken me, instead of Jack, is saying little enough ; for death had already filched from me more than life could possibly make good, and, with the exception of my mother and my sister, to whom I could not think myself essential, I had nobody now left to live for. So I was in deep waters. Some fourteen years now divide me from those lonely, sultry, miserable days ; yet I never like to talk about them, nor am I inclined to think about them more than I can help. It was self-evident that I must dispose of the station, the horses and the stock. I had neither the heart nor the capacity to carry on without my partner, and I wanted—so far as I could feel that I wanted anything—to get out of the country. South Africa seemed to beckon to me. Not that soldiering is in my line ; only I had the qualifications of being able to ride and shoot, with the further one of entertaining no sort of objection to being shot.

Getting out of the country was a long and tedious business, though. A purchaser for Waroomba I was fortunate enough to find without difficulty, and, the

land being mine, there was no impediment in the way of a prompt transfer ; but when it came to selling the brood mares, colts and cattle, and effecting a division between Jack's share of the proceeds and mine, complications naturally arose with the lawyers. Neither in Australia nor anywhere else that I know of can lawyers be hurried. I had to go through many interviews and consultations, one rather painful outcome of which was that, as Jack had died intestate and as Mrs. Pritchard was his next of kin, I found myself involved in a correspondence which I would fain have been spared.

"I wish you would take it all," the beneficiary wrote, by way of answer to some necessary statements and queries of mine. "I know poor Uncle Jack would have liked you to be his heir, and I am sure he would have hated the thought of his money going to sinful me. Besides, I don't want it."

Neither did I ; for we had prospered exceedingly ; but in any event the above suggestion would have been as little flattering as it was relevant. I only quote it as an instance of how difficult it is, in dealing with ladies, to obtain a businesslike reply to a strictly businesslike communication.

When, after some months, I was informed that my further presence could be dispensed with, and when I proceeded to offer my services to the Sydney authorities, I met with a rather chilling reception. I could not, it seemed, be enrolled in the

contingents which had long ago left for the seat of hostilities, and it was not considered probable that an additional corps would be raised or required. The victory of Paardeberg had been won ; Lady-smith and Kimberley had been relieved ; the war was looked upon as virtually over. In the end I was recommended to go to Natal or the Cape and make inquiries. Presumably there would be some regiment of mounted infantry, Australian or other, which would not reject an efficient recruit.

Accordingly, in the month of May I embarked, having written to my mother to explain why I was not returning direct to England, as she had repeatedly begged me to do. I had not until then told her of my intentions, because I did not wish to distress her any sooner than was necessary, and distressed she was sure to be at having two sons under fire, though she never would have tried to dissuade either of us. Arthur, I should have mentioned, was at the front with the Imperial Yeomanry and had indeed earned distinction at Tweefontein ; but this I did not hear of until later. I had a sort of faint hope that I might be admitted into his corps ; but I was not acquainted with the conditions, which, of course, might be of a nature to exclude me.

The voyage in a deliberate old steamer and in persistently stormy weather took so much longer than it ought to have done that our arrival at Cape

Town synchronised with the news of the occupation of Pretoria by Lord Roberts. This, of course, was very far from being final ; but at the time everybody assumed that there would be no more fighting, and I had to submit to the ironical condolences of some fellow-passengers, who may have thought my ardour to die for my country prudently belated. As a matter of fact, I was a little disappointed. Not very seriously, because I cannot imagine that warfare in its modern developments would interest or excite me ; only if one has made up one's mind to play a humble part in a given performance, one feels rather foolish when one is told that the curtain has dropped. That was not precisely the intimation conveyed to me by certain official persons to whom I had access ; but, on the other hand, they could do nothing for me in the way of advice or assistance. They said that perhaps my best plan would be to proceed to Bloemfontein, and this I decided that I would do on the following day.

Bloemfontein, however, was not to see me, nor was I to approach any nearer to the firing line than I then was. While I was turning over back files of old newspapers in the crowded, bustling hotel where I had found shelter, a youngish man of bright and alert aspect accosted me with :

“ I think you are Mr. Vaux, are you not ? My name is Godfrey—Dr. Godfrey.”

And, as I could only look interrogative, he went on : “ Oh, you don't know me ; I only mentioned

my name to save time. Yours is a rather unusual one ; so when I saw it amongst the arrivals I thought I would take the liberty of asking whether you are related to Captain Arthur Vaux of the Imperial Yeomanry."

"I am his brother," I answered, with an instant foreboding of fresh disaster. "I have just landed from Australia. Has anything happened to him ? "

"Well, yes," was Dr. Godfrey's reply. "What happened to him in the first instance was that he got shot on outpost duty, and the surgeons at the front couldn't locate the bullet. He was sent down to us to be overhauled ; but unfortunately he fell ill with enteric the day after his arrival, and we have had an anxious time with him. Although I quite hope and expect to pull him through now, it's impossible to say what mischief there may be, apart from the fever ; so I'm glad you're here."

"Can I see him ? " I asked.

"Oh dear, yes ; the sight of you ought to do him good. I'll take you to the hospital where he is as soon as you like. He is practically convalescent, so far as the enteric is concerned ; but out of danger I can't call him, and I'm afraid it must be some time yet before anything definite can be said as to that."

Thus duty presented itself to me in unheroic guise —as indeed it has done all my life long. Evidently it was going to be my duty to remain at Cape

Town, and I did not, for that matter, quarrel with the prospect. On the contrary, this chance of looking after Arthur and being of some service, however slight, to him was the first favour accorded to me by Providence for many a day.

CHAPTER XX

PRO PATRIÂ

“ **P**ETER,” said Arthur, “ if it has ever occurred to you to wonder why you were born——”

“ It has occurred to me rather often,” I interpolated.

“ Then I’m glad I can satisfy a legitimate curiosity. The reason and the object of you, old Peter, is that you should turn up whenever your fellow-creatures are on their beam-ends and stretch out a paw to them. Anything less likely to happen, or more like you, than that you should come sloping into this accursed death-trap just as I was thinking of throwing up the sponge I couldn’t have conceived ! ”

It was scarcely fair to call the hospital where he had been so well cared for a death-trap, though of course it was not and could not be a palace of luxury. As for throwing up the sponge, I told him at once to let me hear no more language of that sort, and he laughed contentedly. He was really glad to see me, poor fellow, which naturally made me glad in my turn, notwithstanding the shock that his terribly

wasted aspect gave me. That first day I was not allowed to remain with him long ; for he was too weak to talk much and seemed unable to fix his attention upon what I was saying ; so that I doubt whether he understood how I came to be where I was. On the morrow, however, he was decidedly better, and he improved steadily, day by day, until he became, so far as speech and spirits went, virtually himself. Then he had a good deal to impart to an interested listener.

“ My dear chap,” said he, “ this war would have been a godsend to me if I hadn’t managed to get in the way of that invisible Boer’s bullet, which was rotten luck. We had been carefully reconnoitring a kopje and had satisfied ourselves that there was nobody there—there never is anybody there—when we heard a faint report and the fellow beside me dropped down with a grunt. Then, just as I was going to get on to my horse, the gentleman who, no doubt, had been aiming at me deliberately for a minute or two drew trigger and over I rolled like a rabbit. I couldn’t tell you why I tumbled down ; I wasn’t a bit hurt and I was up again in a moment. The sportsman behind the rocks seized that opportunity to plug another hole in me. Only a flesh wound, as it turned out ; still it was a case of stretchers for several of us, and as I’ve still got that first lump of lead somewhere in my inside, I suppose I’m hardly an eligible candidate for insurance. But I was going to tell you why I was jolly glad to join

the Imperial Yeomanry. I had a bit of a row with my old father-in-law last winter ; I don't know whether you heard about it from Cicely ? ”

I said : “ No.”

“ I thought perhaps she might have mentioned it. It wasn't exactly what you could call a row, because he kept his temper and I kept mine ; but it came to his saying that he didn't see why he should support me. You know—or maybe you don't—that poor Vi's money was settled upon herself and her children, supposing she had had any. I daresay that was all right ; I don't understand money matters—never did. But it was rather a facer to be told that there was to be nothing for me after her death. Sir John made out that he had provided me with what he was pleased to call ‘several fortunes,’ and he said he had had enough of that particular form of amusement. Rather nasty of him, because my luck was on the turn and I should have got straight, I expect, if I had been allowed time. However, as he wouldn't allow me anything, the long and the short of it was that, if you'll believe me, I didn't know where to turn for a ten-pound note. The racing stud had to go, which was a good deal of a wrench ; but even then I was in a most unholy muddle. The lawyers and everybody kept on dinning retrenchment into my ears, and I told them to retrench away ; but they didn't seem to know very well how to set about it, which only shows how much easier it is to say wise things than to do them. So then one's duty to one's

Queen and country came in quite nicely. Whether one's gallant conduct in the field has softened Sir John's hard heart or not I'm sure I can't say ; but I shouldn't be surprised if it had. He's just the sort of ridiculous old ranter to swell out his chest and declare that my public spirit deserves a private reward."

"But you couldn't accept——" I began, and then checked myself, remembering how much Arthur had already found it both possible and easy to accept. I amended my protest into : "You can't leave things at sixes and sevens even though you are out of the country. I wish you would tell me a little more precisely what it all means. How do you suppose that you stand financially ? "

I was indeed anxious to know, for nothing would have astonished me ; and I had fears on account of my mother and Cicely, not to mention Chivenham itself. But no details were to be obtained from Arthur, who threw himself back upon his pillows, laughing and spreading out his hands with a helpless gesture, reminiscent of his boyhood.

"Dear old donkey," he remonstrated, "what a question to ask ! I don't know how I stand. How can I, without consulting lawyers and agents and people ? I expect I'm about broke ; but perhaps I'm not. Very likely I shall pull round and it will be all right."

I could not help thinking that it was much more likely to be all wrong. Luckily, I was now a capitalist in a small way, and as I had absolutely no use

for my capital, such as it was, the impaired family resources seemed to offer me an opening. I made some observation in that sense to Arthur, who smiled and thanked me, but doubted whether my savings could have reached a total sufficiently large to be serviceable. However, when I went into particulars, he grew respectfully round-eyed.

"What!—all that out of breeding horses?" he exclaimed. "To think that I bred them too, and arrived at pretty nearly the same figure, with a *minus* sign before it! Peter, it's a thousand pities that you weren't the eldest son. You'll be the head of the family, though, if I go under. Have you thought of that?"

"No," I replied, "I haven't, and I'm not going to think of it either. I'm here to take very good care that you don't go under; only you must lend a hand, please. I suppose you're not anxious to die, are you?"

Arthur did not answer at once. He gave a long sigh and moved his head about restlessly. He was in his forty-first year, and, though at moments he could look almost like a boy, there were others when he appeared more than his age.

"Oh well, no, I suppose not," he ended by saying. "What with one thing and another, life hasn't been all joy; still one does hang on to life. You yourself do, I presume, in spite of your never having put a particularly bright face upon it."

"It has never shown a particularly bright face to me," I observed. "That's one reason why I was on my way towards your invisible marks-men."

"Ah yes, poor old Peter! Now that you mention it, I remember. I remember advising you not to marry, too. You aren't, you see. . . . Although, for that matter, I can't say that I made much of a success of it myself. It's a toss-up always. If I live I shall have to do it again, you know."

"I suppose you will," I assented.

"No doubt about that. Why should I be so keen on having a son, I wonder? Why should anybody care a brass farthing what happens after he is dead and gone? But there it is! As for you, Peter, I take it that you're well rid of the levanting lady. It wasn't because of her, I hope, that you wanted to get yourself shot."

I explained that I had not exactly wanted to be shot, only that circumstances had put me a little out of conceit with existence. I did not tell him about Jack, because, naturally, he would not have understood; but I said that, having done with Australia, I found myself rather at a loose end and unable, in short, to see what was the good of me. Thereupon he reminded me, with a laugh, that he had pointed out what the good of me was.

Arthur and I had many long talks together and

made some plans for a future which he vowed would be a reformed and blameless one in his case. No doubt we were both aware of how precarious the future was ; but we tacitly agreed not to speak of this and to treat our sailing for home in a month, or two months, as a certainty. Of my taking part in the military operations, which had not ceased, there was no question. Arthur declared that he could not get well without me, and Dr. Godfrey backed him up. I daresay the loss to the British forces was inappreciable. After a prolonged examination, conducted by himself and a posse of other surgeons, Dr. Godfrey would tell me no more about his patient than that the bullet must be left alone for the present.

“ We know now where it is,” he said, “ and as soon as your brother is strong enough we must try to remove it. Until then we can’t venture to operate. Meanwhile, his general health is improving.”

I certainly thought that it was, and, although Dr. Godfrey’s language was guarded, I would not allow myself to despond. Really I couldn’t afford it ! I used to take Arthur out for drives on fine days, and sometimes he could not be dissuaded from leaving the carriage and walking a short distance—a breach of medical instructions at which I had to wink.

“ What do you take me for, Peter ? ” he would ask, when I expostulated with him. “ Do you think

I'm so in love with hospital treatment that I'm inviting another illness?"

I did not think that; but I thought he was apt to forget what I never did, that a difficult and dangerous operation lay before him. The doctors, it is true, had not told me that it would be difficult and dangerous; only I knew that if they could have told me the contrary they would have done so. However, as I said before, I was not going to meet trouble half-way, and I considered myself entitled to despatch optimistic reports home.

One afternoon we were watching in sunshine from the lower slopes of Table Mountain the departure of an inky rainstorm which was sweeping out to sea. The ground under our feet was running with water, as was the adjacent road; but the air was crisp and clear after the fugitive downpour, and Arthur, drawing long breaths of it, swore that he felt as fit as a fiddle.

"Quite fit for a voyage," he added. "In fact, I believe a voyage would be the very best thing for me. What do you say to taking our passage, Peter?"

"Well—there's that bullet, you see," I answered hesitatingly.

"Oh yes, I know; but, with all respect to Godfrey and the rest of them, London can supply their betters, and I might just as well spend a week or two on board ship as here."

I said I would make the suggestion to the doctor ; but this did not satisfy him.

" No, no ! don't make suggestions, state intentions ; that's a much sounder plan. Peter, I want most frightfully to get out of this. You can't think how I loathe that hospital and every sight and sound and smell belonging to the place ! Sometimes I feel as if my only chance was to make a bolt. I'm mortally sick of it all ! Not of you, good old nurse ; but of course you'll go on with your nursing just the same. Come !—let's be off ! "

I was too uncertain as to the feasibility of the project to assent there and then ; so we had a little wrangle which ended in his facetiously making as though he would kick me down into the road. He lost his balance, slipped on the muddy ground and was upon the flat of his back before I could catch him. It was nothing of a fall ; but he had to be helped up and he went rather white. During the return drive I saw, though he would not admit it, that he was in pain ; I saw also that it was becoming more and more difficult to him to speak. Then at the moment of arrival he horrified me by fainting dead away.

We carried him up to his bed, and doctors and nurses were swiftly in attendance ; but it was a long time before he came to, and as soon as he showed signs of doing so I was requested to leave the room. After I had waited half an hour or so outside, a nurse came to say that Dr. Godfrey could not see me

just yet. If, however, I would go back to the hotel and have my dinner, he would join me there in the course of the evening. I asked whether there was any cause for alarm ; to which the nurse replied, in the irritatingly cheerful voice affected by her species :

“ Oh no, I shouldn’t think so, Mr. Vaux. Nothing but what a night’s rest will set right.”

I doubted whether that was true ; but, as she probably did not know the truth, I said no more and went off to dinner with very little appetite. I had nearly finished a meal which seemed to me interminable when Godfrey walked in, and the sight of his unsmiling face was enough.

“ You bring bad news,” I said.

He signified sorrowful assent. “ Internal hemorrhage has been the danger all along, and now it has come. We have done what could be done ; but nothing could have saved him in his reduced state. He will hardly get through the night.”

The good man’s distress was evidently greater than his rather curt tone revealed. He had, I knew, conceived a strong attachment to the man who was slipping through his fingers ; probably also he was vexed, as doctors always are, by the sensation of impotence—though they ought to be accustomed to that. I went with him to the hospital, where my poor Arthur lay, groaning his life out. He was quite unconscious, and remained so up to the early hours of the morning, when his laboured breath

ceased. He did not suffer at all, I was assured—neither did I much. Perhaps one may exhaust one's capacity for suffering, just as voluptuaries are said to lose all sense of pleasure. I told Godfrey, who was scrutinising me in a puzzled, concerned way, that I had had many sorrows of late and had learned to expect nothing else.

"I can't howl," I said; "I'm past howling. I suppose these things have to be. Only I wish I hadn't let him walk yesterday afternoon. You warned me that it wasn't safe."

"Oh, don't reproach yourself about that," returned the doctor. "You couldn't have helped his slipping up, and although the fall was, no doubt, the immediate cause of his death, the fact is that the poor fellow's recovery would have been next door to a miracle. I may tell you now that there was very little hope of our being able to operate with success. Perhaps, if he hadn't had enteric . . . But even under the most favourable conditions the chances must have been heavily against him."

Whether it was as Dr. Godfrey said or whether he was kindly desirous of consoling one who happened to be inconsolable I have not medical knowledge enough to determine. Nor, after the passage of a dozen years or more, can I feel the loss of my elder brother to be any less grievous than I did at the time. Many people, like myself, might die at any moment and nobody could honestly say that they were much to be pitied; but in his case, as in Jack Wardrop's,

there was the sense that something instinct with vitality and exuberance had been prematurely quenched. Arthur was born for happiness, and I question whether he ever really attained his birth-right, unless it may have been for a short spell during boyhood. I acknowledge that, if he had lived, his character would not have changed and that he would have continued to keep his family in a state of chronic apprehension. Doubtless that is so. What I know is that I would most thankfully have kept him alive unchanged, and so would all of us. I am well aware that his record, as set forth in these pages, makes no shining light of him ; yet a man is not beloved by everybody without some good reason.

It was on a still, mellow day of late summer that we laid his body beside those of his forefathers in Chivenham churchyard. There was a very large attendance, and many generous tributes were paid to the memory of a gallant soldier who had given his life for his country ; but it was reserved for Sir John Humberston, while walking slowly back with me towards the house which was now so deplorably mine, to make the truest and most apposite comment upon the misfortune to which I owed my inheritance.

“ I should be the last to deny,” said he, in a voice broken by emotion, “ that our poor dear Arthur had his faults. Nevertheless, he was a fine fellow, sir—a fine fellow and a fine gentleman ! And when

I saw you standing there at the head of the grave
and thought of him lying in his coffin, I couldn't—
I'm sure you'll forgive me for saying so—I couldn't
help feeling that death had taken the wrong
one."

CHAPTER XXI

THE YOUNG ONES

NOT very long ago I was made the recipient of a sublime silver centrepiece, presented—as the inscription on its plinth testifies for the information of posterity—to “*Peter Vaux of Chivenham Court Esquire by his Friends and Neighbours, In Recognition of his Great Services to Agriculture in the West, As well as of the Universal Esteem which his Public Spirit, Benevolence and Geniality have Won for Him.*”

I can’t think what they meant by “geniality.” But perhaps they did not mean anything in particular and were only baffled in a painstaking search for *le mot juste* to round off their period. The agrarian achievements and the public spirit I can make shift to swallow, while the Rector of Chivenham, who ought to be an authority, does not hesitate for a moment to pronounce his patron benevolent. The Reverend Canon Vaux (I had been fortified by episcopal approval in appointing Tom to the benefice when it fell vacant, and the selection had vindicated itself)—the Reverend Thomas, I say, was invited to speak a few words at the presentation

ceremony, and although he professed to feel some diffidence about singing his brother's praises, he successfully overcame it. In point of fact, he managed to make me much more hot and uncomfortable than the kindly magnate who headed the deputation had done. Still it was all as gratifying as it was unexpected, and now whenever I sit under the shadow of that monstrous piece of plate—which Cicely tells me that I must absolutely do as often as we have people to dinner, unless I wish to be thought unappreciative—it will aptly symbolise and summarise for me the chronicle of a decade.

Upon the whole, a quiet, gently progressive, not very eventful decade, during which I settled down by degrees into my appointed groove and accomplished—witness the *épergne*—such small things as I could accomplish. Putting order into the estate accounts and arriving at a clean balance sheet would have been no small thing if I had not, thanks to poor Jack Wardrop's efficiency, been in possession of a substantial reserve fund. Even so, I had my work cut out for me, and Sir John Humberston was quite huffy because what he chose to describe as my “stubborn arrogance” would not allow me to accept his proffered aid; but in the long run we pulled through and found ourselves really as well off as we had any need to be. Of course my mother and Cicely came to live with me at Chivenham. The former, I think, never wholly recovered from the blow that Arthur's death was to her; though

she lived for another six years and was, if not what is usually understood by happy, at least free from cares and worries. What more can any of us look for when the shadows begin to lengthen and the burden and heat of the day are over ? Cicely never liked me to say that I regarded myself as virtually dead and my actual existence as a sort of placid postscript. Contented with whatever meagre doles the gods might be pleased to bestow upon herself, she has always had a high standard of felicity for other people and cannot bear them to fall short of attaining to it. I suppose, therefore, that her determination to provide me with a second wife was not surprising ; but it was a little embarrassing until I took cover behind Tom, who, in answer to my appeal, was compelled to say that he could not approve of remarriage in the case of divorced persons. I associated myself with that pronouncement and allowed my views to become known : otherwise there is no saying what might not have happened ; for many a spinster in Devon and elsewhere is more broad-minded.

Some touch of sadness must needs attach to being elderly and out of the game ; but compensations are not far to seek. The game of life is a rough one. To set against the interest and excitement of it you have the hard knocks which you will scarcely escape and which few persons of mature years would care to undergo again. As for me, who had more than once had to “retire, hurt,” I very willingly took my place

upon the spectators' benches for the remainder of the show. The best plan, if one has no offspring of one's own, is to make friends with some of the young players, and in process of time it was my good fortune to acquire a young friend whose company was always a joy to me. This was Elsie Humberston, Sir John's only daughter by his second marriage, who at eighteen had all the fascinating attributes of her age, enhanced by others which were her peculiar property. What made her take to me I cannot say ; but I know what made me in the first instance take to her. She was not really like Vi in appearance, being on a smaller scale and I daresay most people would think prettier ; yet at moments she had a quite startling look of her, and there was also, it seemed to me, some similarity of disposition between them. My timorous advances—I do not find that age begets increased self-confidence—were met with such prompt cordiality that an unformulated treaty of alliance was concluded while I was still in the stage of addressing her as "Miss Humberston." As far as I can remember, she never called me anything but "Mr. Peter," except when she pleased me by forgetting the Mister, as happened every now and then. When her people were in residence at Hallacombe she was my frequent visitor, bearing me company on my methodical rounds to the home farm, the kennels and so forth, and beguiling the way with personal confidences which were full of interest to her hearer, as well as

to herself. Like her half-sister before her, Elsie was something of a spoilt child ; though the spoiling that she got from her father and her brothers did not spoil her in any true sense of the word. Besides, her mother was always there as a corrective.

The second Lady Humberston was a somewhat terrible person. Terrible, I mean, as inspiring terror ; but, for the rest, animated, I have no doubt, by philanthropic motives and a high conception of her duty to the world at large. A massive, handsome woman, who held herself very upright and had a pair of resolute little black eyes beneath a towering citadel of grey hair, Lady Humberston announced herself to the least perceptive of observers as the ardent suffragist that she was. Being likewise a rather aggressive Radical, she delighted in refusing precedence to rank, acknowledged no aristocracy, save that of talent, and was fond of filling her house with strange-looking beings whom she called intellectual, though one would not always have suspected them of intelligence if one had not been told. To so staunch an upholder of titular dignities as Sir John this must have been a trifle painful ; but Sir John was nearer eighty than seventy, and if he was afraid of his wife, he was one of a large and respectable phalanx, which included my humble self. It included Elsie too.

“ What makes mother so appalling and invincible,” I was told, “ is that she takes no more notice of people who differ from her than a garden-roller

does of a worm. If you get in the way, you're flattened out, that's all, and on she goes. She says she makes it a point to consult us all before she forms her plans, and so she does ; but as for any one of us having the ghost of a chance of being listened to ! " . . .

" I should have thought that you were a good deal in the habit of forming your own plans," I remarked.

" Oh, nobody forbids me to *form* them—or my opinions either. It's only when they happen to conflict with mother's that they and I are whisked aside like dust."

" You are bold enough to avow yourself an anti-suffragist, anyhow," said I.

" Because it doesn't matter whether I am or not. Supposing, by a miracle, the question were to become of any importance, I should soon be seen prancing up Regent Street with a hammer in my muff or hurling a dead cat at the Prime Minister."

That may have been a slight exaggeration ; still I had had occasion to observe that she was more than a little in awe of the formidable lady whose methods she had accurately enough described. To take it for granted that you will be obeyed is no bad way of securing obedience, and if Elsie was in some respects an independent young woman, I could nevertheless imagine her accepting a husband of her mother's choice for no better reason than that he had been kindly, but firmly, assigned to her.

Now I did not wish anything of that kind to happen. I had a wish connected with Elsie's future which took airy shape in the very first days of our intimacy, but which had remained a castle in the air owing to my repeated failures to get Ralph down at a time when the Humberstons were at Hallacombe. Ralph, who was my brother Bob's eldest son and my natural successor, was coupled with Elsie in my affections, and a match between them looked so ideal from my point of view that their conceiving a prompt mutual aversion seemed to be almost assured in advance. Still I was anxious to give them at least an opportunity of behaving with more consideration. Ralph, I may mention, was considered by the family to resemble me, and it may be that we had a few characteristics in common which had helped to make us the excellent friends that, happily for me, we were. Physically I can never in my best days have borne more than a distant family likeness to that well-grown, bright-faced youth. During his Oxford time Ralph was often at Chivenham, but never, by a strange fatality, while Elsie was in the neighbourhood, and it was not until he was reading for the Bar that I was at last able to effect the desired introduction. The desired result—so far as Ralph's part in it was concerned—followed with an expedition which was almost disconcerting. He had seen her perhaps some half-dozen times when he informed me, as a very great secret, that if he did not marry Miss Humberston, he would never marry

at all. And this, he went on to observe, was equivalent to saying that he would live and die a bachelor, inasmuch as Miss Humberston was not for him.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Oh, for one thing," he answered, "because I should never have the cheek to ask her. They're so beastly rich!"

"Her father is," I agreed; "but, as he has sons, I don't see why he should give her anything beyond a moderate dowry. And, if it comes to that, you have expectations, remember."

He said he hoped I should live for another thirty years, and, on my rejoicing that that was not my wish, he declared that it was everybody else's. Ralph has very nice manners.

"But even if I were all sorts of things that I'm not," he went on despondently, "she wouldn't give me a second thought. You could hardly expect her to, could you?"

Being exempt from that modesty which is so becoming in the young, I could and did expect Elsie to think twice before she turned up her nose at my nephew. However, there was no need to tell him so. I merely exhorted him not to be so faint-hearted; after which we resumed our trudge through the turnips (we were trying to shoot partridges over dogs at the time), and I must say that the young gentleman shot pretty badly.

I had not long to wait for the young lady's views.

I don't, of course, mean that she stated them with Ralph's lucidity, nor that she stated them at all, save by remote implication ; only she did say enough to show me that she had bestowed more than one or two thoughts upon him. Casual, careless interrogatories were met by me with a corresponding unconcern, and if Ralph obtained a good character, that was only because I could not in honesty give him anything else. To be sure, the craft and subtlety of an experienced old man are not to be measured against the intuitions of the simplest girl in such encounters ; so it may well be that Elsie divined what I was scheming for. But perhaps it was of no great consequence if she did.

"I never get a comfortable talk with you now," she complained one day. "You and your nephew seem to spend your whole time hand in hand."

"Yes, it's a bore, isn't it ?" said I ; "but what am I to do ? I can't tell him to go away, can I ?"

She was rather adroit in taking him away, I noticed ; but, as she always went with him, the cause of comfort and conversation did not benefit in my case. In fine, things appeared to be shaping after a fashion which might be accounted fairly promising when Lady Humberston issued abrupt marching orders and I was left with a disconsolate lover on my hands. Needless to add that he did not remain on them long. The Humberstons had shifted their quarters to London, whither Ralph's

legal studies called him, and it appeared that he had been informed of where Grosvenor Place was.

"Oh, that's nothing," he sighed ; "she'd have said as much as that to you or anybody. I suppose I'm an ass, but I suppose I shall go."

"You will be an unpardonable ass if you don't," I returned. "My own impression, which I give you for what it may be worth, is that you have very little to do except to declare yourself. But I may be wrong."

Ralph shook his head. "You are quite wrong," he answered, "and you would know it if she had ever snubbed you as she has me."

I did not regard her snubbing him as an unfavourable sign, and although he failed to keep his promise of writing to tell me how he sped, I remained placidly sanguine. Interest in and sympathy with the loves of our juniors do to some extent replace our own atrophied emotions ; but the exciting element of uncertainty is apt to make default. To an onlooker it seems so obvious that Jack and Jill, after sundry possible misadventures, will end by falling into one another's arms that the misadventures only provoke an indulgent smile. Even when, by exception, these prove irremediable, we can hardly persuade ourselves that we are witnessing anything very tragic. The world is so replete with other Jacks and other Jills, available for the ultimate consolation of the bereaved ! As for my own

particular young pair, there was really nothing on earth that I could see to hold them apart.

I have a small flat in Whitehall which gives me shelter when the lawyer or the dentist or the tailor or somebody of that sort requires my presence in London, and the month of November found me in temporary occupation of it. I thought that I should very likely meet Ralph at his father's house in Portland Place, where I was to dine on the evening of my arrival ; but he was not amongst the nephews and nieces who greeted me, and Bob—now Sir Robert and a conspicuous ornament of the judicial bench—chuckled, as at some diverting reminiscence, when he remarked :

“ You won’t see your friend Ralph to-night. He says he isn’t fit for decent company, and, upon my word, I don’t think he is, poor devil ! I’ll tell you about it afterwards.”

He told me about it when we were smoking together in his den at a later hour.

“ I suppose,” he began, “ you know of this stupid business of Ralph’s with the Humberston girl.”

“ I didn’t know it was stupid,” I said.

“ Well, I mean he’s too young to think of marrying yet, and, as I took the liberty of reminding him, he hasn’t got any income to marry upon.”

I observed that that difficulty might perhaps be surmounted ; whereupon my brother shook his finger at me.

“ Ah, old Peter, that’s you all over ! I don’t

believe you're really rich, I don't see how you can be ; but if ever I find myself destitute I shall know where to apply with confidence for relief. To be sure, the boy is your heir, for you're safe to see me out, living the unhealthy life that I do in fusty Courts of Law ; so if you choose to make a son of him, it isn't for me to object. Be that as it may, you aren't going to make a niece by marriage of Miss Elsie, it seems."

" Surely she hasn't refused him ! " I exclaimed.

" He hasn't given her the chance ; he proudly withdraws. Ralph is always putting me in mind of you, Peter ; he has all your propensity for cutting off his nose to spite his face. His nose, I understand, has been put badly out of joint this time—and by whom in the world should you suppose ? By young Lacy, the actor ! "

Never having heard of young Lacy, the actor, I could not exhibit the surprise which appeared to be expected of me ; but as, according to Bob, he was a celebrity, in addition to being "a deuced good-looking fellow," surprise might possibly have been out of place. Lady Humberston, I was told, had taken him up with enthusiasm. He was exactly the kind of man whom Lady Humberston might be depended upon to take up.

" A gentleman ? " I asked.

" Oh dear, no ! At least, only in so far as everybody is a gentleman nowadays. I was told this afternoon that a gentleman wanted to speak to me

and it turned out to be my chauffeur, who no doubt habitually alludes to me behind my back as ‘old Vaux.’ By Ralph’s account, Lacy is a champion bounder ; but Ralph may be prejudiced.”

At this moment Ralph himself walked in, with his hands in his pockets, an unlighted pipe in his mouth and a countenance indicative of the deepest dejection. He remarked that, as he rather wanted to have a chat with me, he had dropped in upon the chance of finding me where I was.

“ Shall I leave the room ? ” asked his father meekly.

“ No, my lord,” I answered ; “ we’ll do that. And we should like somebody to whistle for a taxi, please.”

Soon afterwards my nephew was stretching out his long legs before the fire in my sitting-room and was ready—so he said—to give as full an account of himself and his sorrows as I could want.

CHAPTER XXII

THE HISTRION

R ALPH does not possess in any marked degree the gift of narration. When he had told me that it was all up, that it was his own fault, that he would do just the same again, that he did not a bit regret having called Lacy a cad, that he had no complaint to make and that he wished to the deuce he had never been born, he seemed to think that my intelligence ought to be capable of filling in the details of this rough outline. Perhaps it was ; still I had to beg for rather more specific information as a basis for the sage counsel which he did not solicit, but presumably desired.

“I tell you plainly,” said he, thrusting his fingers through his hair and staring blankly at the fire, “that I can’t make it out—and I can’t make *her* out either. It may be partly her mother’s doing ; Lady Humberston, as you know, loves outrageous people. But it isn’t Elsie’s way to let herself be dictated to by her mother or anybody else, and besides . . . Oh, I don’t deny that the man is good-looking, and I suppose he must be clever. All the same, I’ll undertake to say that before you had been five

minutes in the room with him you'd be dying to kick him out of it. He's—he's such a familiar hog!"

"And you described him in those terms to Elsie, perhaps?"

"Not in those terms. I did tell her he was a cad. I really felt that I ought."

"In case she shouldn't know? Very thoughtful and friendly of you. And upon that, I suppose, you quarrelled."

"No, we didn't exactly quarrel. She was kind enough to say that she would be very sorry to quarrel with me; so she hoped I wouldn't speak again in that way about a man whom she particularly liked."

"Are you sure that she does particularly like him?" I asked.

Ralph shrugged his shoulders. "Well, she said so, and it looks as if she did. I don't understand it; but I suspect the truth is that we don't any of us understand how women feel. Amongst men there couldn't be two opinions about Lacy."

"So bad as that?"

"Oh, a perfectly poisonous fellow! Wait till you've seen him."

"I'll make a point of seeing him," said I. "Meanwhile, you, I imagine, are making a point of not seeing her."

"Well, I don't go to the house any more. Why should I? Look here, Uncle Peter, I'm out of it; she wouldn't have had anything to do with me, Lacy

or no Lacy. But you have influence with her and she'll listen to you. I don't ask you, and I don't wish you, to put in a word for me ; only for God's sake don't let her marry that beast ! ”

All this, and more to the like effect, did not sound to me so very desperate. Ralph had invited a rebuff and had received what, under the circumstances, might pass for a quite temperate one. Also it was inconceivable that Mr. Lacy, if he even remotely corresponded to the picture drawn of him, could have touched Elsie's heart. On the other hand, as Ralph had sagaciously remarked, we none of us really know how women feel, and I am too old to build much upon antecedent probabilities. I refrained, therefore, from offering encouragement to my young man and limited myself to a promise that I would use such powers as I might possess to avert the catastrophe which he dreaded.

As a first step, I wrote to Elsie to say that I was coming to dinner and that a post-card, naming her earliest free evening, would oblige. I knew her well enough to take these liberties, and Lady Humberston—with whom I may mention that I had always kept upon excellent terms—rather liked her hospitality to be claimed in that unconventional style. An immediate and cordial reply appointed the next evening but one, my correspondent adding :

“ You'll meet a few people, I'm afraid, but it isn't a party. Only General Aldenham and his wife,

whom I think you know, and Mr. Lacy, the famous actor, of whom you must at least have heard, and I forget who else."

That I was to have an introduction to the famous Mr. Lacy, without being reduced to asking for one, was satisfactory ; though I seemed to scent a whiff of bravado in Elsie's intimation. Aldenham is an old schoolfellow of mine. Happening upon him at the Club, I remarked that we were going to meet at Lady Humberston's, and, after he had expressed the gratification which politeness demanded, he drew me aside to inquire whether it was a fact that there was a project of marriage between that nice girl and Lacy, the actor fellow ; because it was being talked about all over the place, and if there was any truth in it, Humberston really should be given a hint.

" Of what ? " I asked. " Aren't the actor fellow's morals up to the mark ? "

" Well, I believe it's notorious that he's a pretty loose fish ; but there's more than that. Between you and me, Vaux, that young gentleman was hoofed out of Sandhurst for stealing. It was a bad case, and of course he ought to have been had up before the magistrates ; only nobody cared to prosecute. My boy, who was there at the time, knows all about it, and so do any number of others."

" Then possibly Sir John Humberston does," I suggested.

" No, Humberston wouldn't be much in the way of hearing, and I suppose it isn't anybody's particular

business to inform him. Unless, perhaps, it's yours. Anyhow, he can't have heard, or he wouldn't have the man in his house."

"Why," I asked, "should it be my business to bell the cat?"

"Why, my dear chap, because you're connected with the Humberstons, because you're understood to have taken the girl under your wing, and because it would be a downright infamy to let her throw herself away upon a scamp like Lacy."

For all that, I did not feel much disposed to tell Sir John that Mr. Lacy was, or had been, a thief. It was upon the cards that I might have to tell Elsie; but that was not yet certain, and one would rather not be a delator if one can help it. When I should have seen the two together, I should very soon know whether there was any real danger to be fought against or not. All that I had heard of Lacy tended to make me doubt there being any; whereas I could easily enough believe that Elsie had found him serviceable as a corrective to somebody else's presumption.

Unhappily, I am not quite as acute as age and experience sometimes tempt me to believe myself. Age and experience do indeed habituate one to seeing the same old games played over and over again, with the identical old moves, until one feels as if one might set up for a prophet on cheap terms; but then there are exceptions to be taken into account, together with the chapter of accidents;

so at last it has to be admitted that in dealing with the human subject nobody can ever be sure of anything. On a first survey of Mr. Lacy, a floridly handsome young man, with glossy black hair, jewelled buttons on his white waistcoat and a single diamond blazing out of the middle of his shirt, I said to myself that only a fob was needed to stamp him as inherently innocuous, and when he turned a little more towards me, exhibiting on his hip a piece of watered-silk ribbon, from which a seal or something dangled, I breathed freely. "Unimaginable!" I thought.

Yet the way in which Elsie looked at him, the way in which she talked to him, the way in which she, so to speak, flaunted him in the face of an obviously disapproving and regretful assemblage, gave me pause. All that, to be sure, might only mean, "Mind your own business, ladies and gentlemen, and be hanged to you!" *Per contra* it might mean—and I began to be afraid it did—that she was defiantly proud of the man, that she knew he was a cad and that she didn't care. Such dreadful aberrations are not unheard of, and when they occur they are apt to be serious.

He took her in to dinner, and, as the two were seated opposite to me, I was enabled to watch their demeanour, which was scarcely reassuring. It was not only Elsie who wore an air of defiance. Repeatedly, and without any intention on my part, I encountered the indescribably offensive stare of Mr.

Lacy's half-closed eyes. I should have said that they expressed a mixture of curiosity, amusement and contempt if there had been anything in the aspect of a quiet, elderly gentleman to account for the display of such sentiments. As it was, I had to conclude that he took me for my nephew's champion and his own adversary. Under no circumstances could I have helped feeling myself the latter ; for, special circumstances apart, a more objectionable person than Mr. Lacy I had never come across. He talked very loud ; he kept striking into the general conversation by laying down the law upon subjects of which he appeared to be ignorant ; while upon what might be presumed to be his own subject he spoke with ludicrous finality and self-sufficiency. Instigated by Lady Humberston—and, I grieved to note, applauded by Elsie—he obliged us with his views upon contemporary drama. That did not take long ; since it seemed that there was none worthy of the name, nor was a single play at that time being represented in London worth crossing the street to see. And when Aldenham, to whom the employment of sarcasm in its finer shades does not come very readily, remarked, "Perhaps that's because you aren't acting in one of them, Mr. Lacy," he replied with a suave smile :

"Oh, thanks—awfully nice of you to say so. But the fact is that even I shouldn't be able to make anything of the stuff that they're producing just now."

After the ladies had left us, he strolled round the table, dropped down upon a chair at my elbow and set himself almost undisguisedly to the task of picking a quarrel with me. What Ralph had said to me about his familiarity and my probable longing to kick him out of the room was no exaggeration. He was ingeniously impertinent, ingeniously provocative—too ingeniously for his purpose. He forgot, or was not old enough to know, that I was unlikely to fall into the same mistake as my nephew had made, and that if I desired to evict him (as I certainly did), I should not take steps liable to bring about my own eviction. It struck me that, in spite of his vanity and vulgarity, he might understand very well how to win Elsie's partisanship. Of her mother's support he probably felt confident, while Sir John—grown unobservant, indifferent and self-centred in old age—would offer little resistance to his women-folk. Mr. Lacy was, I flattered myself, a little disconcerted by my mild urbanity, which of course I did not permit him to disturb.

But with Elsie, who was both more intelligent and better informed, I had a somewhat harder row to hoe. Being in the house for the avowed object of talking to her, and for another unavowed object which she doubtless guessed, I could not hesitate when she invited me into a corner of the back drawing-room ; after which she made me sit down, looked me straight in the face and opened fire with :

“ Now then ! ”

"It's you to play," I answered. "I have been vegetating at home, as usual, all this time and I haven't a particle of news for you. What have you got for me?"

She had a good deal of one kind and another; none of it specially interesting, though I feigned amiable interest. She gave me, I noticed, one or two opportunities of mentioning the person of whom we were both thinking; but, as I declined them, she had at last to come to the point by asking:

"Well, what is your opinion of Mr. Lacy?"

"That," I replied, "depends a good deal upon what yours is."

"How can it? But I'll tell you at once, if you want to know, that I find him delightful. So clever and quaint and unlike other people!"

"I agree with you that he is not much like other people," said I.

"Oh, I see! Now please don't say that he is underbred. It's on the tip of your tongue to call him so, and that's such a foolish, narrow form of criticism! One no more asks whether a man of genius is well-bred than one troubles about his having the regulation number of fingers and toes."

"I should quite distinctly prefer him to have ten of each," I answered; "but my perceptions are, as you hint, limited and obtuse. I shouldn't even have guessed that your friend was a man of genius if I hadn't your authority for it that he is."

Elsie tapped the floor impatiently with her foot.
“ How rude and disagreeable you are this evening ! ”
she exclaimed.

Now really, considering how polite and agreeable I had been throughout a difficult evening, this was enough to make me earn a hitherto unearned stricture. But it did not ; it only made me change the subject. I had discovered as much as I could hope to discover, and I knew what I was going to do.

To begin with, I sat out everybody, except Mr. Lacy, and I meant sitting him out if I had to cleave to my chair until morning. Notwithstanding his genius, it took him some time to realise this ; but at length he jumped up, and I promptly followed suit. While he was struggling with a gorgeous fur-lined coat in the hall, I blandly suggested that, as it was such a fine night, we might walk a little way ; a proposal which evidently surprised him. However, after staring at me for a moment, he broke into a short laugh and answered :

“ Right you are ! ”

No sooner were we out of the house than I unmasked my batteries ; for there was nothing to be gained by preliminary skirmishing.

“ Mr. Lacy,” I began, “ your behaviour this evening has been so unmistakably hostile that I presume you must set me down as an enemy of yours.”

“ I’m quite sure you are,” he returned, stopping for a moment to light a cigarette.

"Well," I resumed, "that is so far the case that I find myself obliged to say something unpleasant to you. I have reason to think that you are not a desirable acquaintance for my friends whom we have just left, and I must ask you to cease visiting them."

"That's pretty cool!" he laughed. "Anything else that you would like, Mr. Vaux?"

"No, thank you," I answered; "I have no further instructions to give."

"You're so modest and moderate! And may I venture to ask what the devil you mean by giving me any instructions at all?"

"That," I replied, "is, of course, what I was going to tell you. I prefer telling you to telling Sir John Humberston that I am acquainted with the disgraceful circumstances under which you left Sandhurst."

"So that's it, is it?" said he, without losing countenance. "Then allow me to remark, Mr. Vaux, that a meaner and feebler attempt to extort blackmail I never heard of. I don't know whether there are a great many men who can boast of an absolutely clean record—I suspect that you can't, anyhow—but if you think Miss Humberston is the sort of girl——"

"We'll leave Miss Humberston's name out, please," I interjected.

"If you think Miss Humberston is the sort of girl to turn her back upon a man who has done his level

best to atone for a misdemeanour of his boyhood, all I can say is you don't know much about her."

He had the better of me there, and I will not deny that for a moment I felt as mean as he called me ; but then, remembering what he so palpably was and what I could on no account suffer him to become, I hardened my heart.

" You know very well," said I, " that if I speak a word to Sir John, his door will be shut in your face. I am not discussing the justice or injustice of the thing ; we must take the world as we find it, and the world isn't merciful to thieves. What I offer you is voluntary withdrawal, as an alternative to dismissal."

" Your generous offer," returned Lacy, " is declined without thanks. I perfectly understand what your game is. You and your family have had a good lot of Humberston money already ; but that isn't enough for you. Your nephew has got to be provided for now, and you're afraid of my cutting him out ; so you think yourself mighty clever because you have disinterred an old scandal against me which is no secret, though other people have had the decency to hold their tongues about it. I can't congratulate you upon your choice of a weapon, Mr. Vaux ; it isn't a very honourable or scrupulous one, and I am by no means convinced that it would prove effectual if you were to use it. But it so happens that you aren't going to use it. It so happens that, instead of your dictating terms to me, I'm going

to dictate them to you. Although you evidently don't stick at a trifle, you won't denounce me to Sir John, or to Miss Humberston either. Would you like me to tell you why you won't ? ”

We were walking along the south side of Piccadilly. He now came to a standstill, threw himself back against the park-railings, dropped his cigarette and, folding his arms histrionically, announced :

“ Because—I am your son ! ”

CHAPTER XXIII

UNCLE CHARLES TO THE RESCUE

EITHER because it is one's natural impulse to appear unmoved by theatrical thunderbolts or because I really did not feel much surprise, my only rejoinder to my companion's assertion was :

"Indeed ! You are provided with proofs, of course ? "

"I have ample proofs," he replied gloomily (I am sure he was deriving professional gratification from the little scene), "in the shape of letters and other documents which leave no room for doubt as to my parentage. My mother's maiden name was Lintern, and the name to which I believe I am legally entitled is Cawston, though I have never cared to use it. The documents are open to inspection, in case of your thinking it worth while to dispute these statements."

I signified that I accepted them. If, as I said just now, I was scarcely surprised, it was because in the course of the evening the man had had tricks and gestures fugitively, bafflingly familiar to me, and now, as I surveyed him by the light of a gas-lamp,

I saw plainly enough to whom he was at once so like and so unlike.

"It may interest you," he resumed, with an elaborate sneer, "though I don't suppose it will cause you any remorse, to hear what became of my mother after your desertion of her. She had a cruel time of it with Cawston, who was a lazy sot and who soon squandered every penny of her small dowry. She stuck to him as long as she could ; but he treated her so brutally that at last she had to get a separation. Now I'm not going to pretend that my poor mother was a model of virtue, and I won't shock you, who are so virtuous yourself, by explaining just how and why my childhood was surrounded by luxuries of a kind. Besides, I don't know that such salaries as she earned at theatres and music-halls weren't sufficient ; I can only guess. What I do know is that she managed to give me the education of a gentleman and that she was a good mother to me, whether she was what you and people like you would call good in other respects or not."

She hadn't, poor woman, managed to make a gentleman of him ; but in alluding to her he had at least become human and had ceased to talk for effect. I said :

"Your mother is dead, I suppose ? "

"Yes, she died some years ago."

"And your grandparents too ? "

"Oh dear, yes ; I can only just remember them. When my mother was dying she told me a part of

her history. Until then I had always supposed that I was Cawston's son ; though of course I had taken the name of Lacy, by which she was known. She thought I ought to be told who I really was ; but she was very urgent with me that I should never apply to you for money or help, and I promised her that I never would. That promise, as you know, has been kept."

He was growing stagey again, and I had to remind him briefly that a sum of five thousand pounds had been paid to the late Mrs. Cawston upon the express condition that no such applications as he referred to were to be made.

" Bah ! " he returned, with a snap of his finger and thumb, " what's an agreement of that sort worth ? How is it to be enforced ? I could have bled you to any extent, sir, and you know it. Well, I haven't done so, and I'm not going to do so—either now or at any future time. All I want of you is that you should leave me alone. You can't call that an exorbitant demand."

" Doesn't it strike you," I asked, " that you are making it more than ever necessary for me to tell Sir John Humberston what I know about you ? "

" Can't say it does," he answered ; " considering that if you tell him what you know about me, I shall tell him what I know about *you*."

" Will that make him any more eager to welcome you as a son-in-law ? "

" I don't see why it should make him any less so.

But you won't tell him. I know rather more about you, my revered father, than you think. I know that you're a highly respectable and respected country gentleman and that you wouldn't a bit like to have a certain story circulated in your part of the world. It's true that it's an old story ; but it isn't a very pretty one, and if your friends came to hear that you had plotted against your own son, so as to get hold of a well-dowered wife for your nephew, they might begin to wonder whether you were quite the man they had taken you for. No, sir, I don't think you'll say anything to Sir John about that Sandhurst affair. Frankly, I'd rather you didn't. Nevertheless, when you talk of his shutting his door in my face, you go a bit too far. Sir John is pretty nearly in his dotage, and her ladyship, remember, is on my side. She's always on the side of great men, and I fancy that she's not inclined to be hard upon their failings. Perhaps you don't believe that I'm a great man ? Well, I'm recognised already as a great actor, and in a few years' time it will be recognised that I'm as far ahead of all other living actors as Sara Bernhardt is of all other living actresses. I shouldn't mind being independent of my art ; but I've no notion of giving it up, and Lady Humberston won't have to blush for her son-in-law, I promise you."

Lady Humberston's skin is perhaps a trifle thick ; yet to such a son-in-law it seemed to me that she would have to pay the tribute of a lifelong blush.

As I left his tirade unanswered, he demanded rather sharply, after a moment :

“ Now, what are you going to do ? ”

“ I am going,” I replied, as we turned into St. James’s Street, “ to call a taxi and wish you good-night. For the rest, all I can say at present is that I shall do what, upon consideration, may appear to me to be my duty.”

That was in truth all that I could say. My mind does not move rapidly, and before I could make it up I had to be alone, so as to take a comprehensive view of the situation. I had refrained from telling Lacy that he was not my son because I had not had time to perpend all the effects of that disclaimer, and I was afraid of doing in haste what I might repent of at my leisure ; but during the short transit in the taxi to Whitehall it came to me quite distinctly that I was no longer bound by the pledges of seven and twenty years back. Save myself, all the persons concerned in that poor little sordid drama were dead and gone ; I should injure nobody by letting the truth come out at last ; while my personal comfort would obviously be consulted by the elimination of an alleged son who might have some good qualities to set against his obnoxious ones, yet who could not open his mouth without giving me cold shivers. This, however, was merely incidental ; the main thing was to prevent him from marrying Elsie—or rather to prevent Elsie from marrying him, of which calamity there was real

danger. With every determination to face facts in a common-sense way, I could not bring myself to believe that she was in love with the man ; but that she was attracted by him and that she might—especially if opposed—accept him I was fain to acknowledge. Would she be put off by being informed that, when scarcely more than a boy, he had been guilty of an act of petty larceny ? Perhaps so, and perhaps not ; there was no telling. Then would she be put off by hearing that he was the son of her late half-sister's husband ? It did not seem very probable. Her father perhaps might be ; and indeed I began to see that I should have to rely chiefly upon Sir John, who, for all his senile lethargy, did remain the dominant factor, inasmuch as he held the purse-strings and inasmuch as Lacy's motives were all but avowedly mercenary. My best plan, I thought, would be to go straight to Sir John. It would be hardly worth while to seek out Lacy (whose address, besides, I did not know), for he would be pretty certain to dispute the truth of my story and to maintain that I was his father in spite of it.

I had got as far as that, while meditating by my fireside, when it occurred to me that the truth of my story might not be at all easy to establish. Proofs and witnesses were alike wanting. Lacy professed to be in possession of documents relating to the subject ; but I had none, and if any existed amongst my father's papers, they would, in the

nature of things, tell rather against than for me. It looked very much as though this uncorroborated assertion of mine might wear the aspect of an ignoble attempt to saddle my dead brother with my misdeeds. Then I remembered what I ought to have thought of before, that good old Uncle Charles was still alive. That he would be able to produce documentary evidence was, of course, not to be expected ; but at least he would be a witness whose word Sir John would hardly question.

After breakfast the next morning I made for the house in Dover Street which my uncle had inherited as a young man and where, as the liveliest of septuagenarians, he still resided. He had just returned, fresh and rosy, from his daily ride in the Park and was about to leave, so he told me, for Cambridgeshire, where he had a shooting.

" But not within the next hour, I hope," said I. " The fact is that I rather badly want you at this moment, and I shouldn't wonder if I were to be wanting you again before long."

" My dear Peter," was Uncle Charles's reply, " I'm always at your orders. I didn't mean to leave until late in the afternoon, and I won't leave then if I can be of any use to you by staying where I am. What's up now ? Has your friend Ralph been getting himself into some mess ? "

" Not into what you would call a mess," I answered ; " but he is in trouble, and so am I."

I then embarked upon a statement of the position

of affairs which I intended to make both concise and lucid ; but, as this was the first that my uncle had heard of a possible match between Ralph and Elsie, he soon interrupted me.

" Oh, that's the little plot that you've been hatching, is it ? " said he. " I might have guessed that you were after something of the sort ; only upon my word I wasn't sure that you didn't want to marry the girl yourself."

" At my age ! " I ejaculated.

" Don't insult me by talking about your age, Peter. Though, if it comes to that, I'm game to walk or run a mile against you for a five-pound note any day you like."

" I'm sure you are," I answered, " and I'm sure you would win the fiver too. But please let me get on. I haven't come to the complications yet."

When I came to that part of them which concerned Elsie's relations with Lacy, Uncle Charles pursed up his lips and shook his head. He said his experience of women was that if they took an infatuation for a scamp, you only increased it by demonstrating to them what a scamp the object of their infatuation was. He had heard something of Lacy and nothing to his advantage ; nobody but Lady Humberston would have had the fellow in the house. Still, since there he was, it was a question whether he could be dislodged. Oh, that story about his having been expelled from Sandhurst ? Yes—well—that might be effectual ; but it was no

certainty. Of two things one : either the girl was merely utilising him as a means of stirring up Ralph's jealousy, in which case the best thing to do was to leave her alone, or else she had really fallen in love with him, and then a partisan of Ralph's could have no show at all.

"But I am thinking of Elsie as well as Ralph," I observed. "I'm just as fond of her as I am of him ; so I can't stand and look on while she commits suicide. Now I want to tell you why I came here and how I think you can help me. Last night I dined with the Humberstons and, as I walked away with Lacy, I took that opportunity of formulating an open declaration of war. In other words, I said that if he didn't drop them, I should take care to make them drop him by enlightening them as to his record."

"That wasn't very wise of you, was it ? "

"I don't think it was very foolish. The threat meant something to him ; although he had what he took for a crushing rejoinder to it when he suddenly turned round upon me and proclaimed that he was my son."

"Your *what*?—your son ? The deuce he did ! "

"Yes, and I didn't contradict him ; at the moment it didn't seem certain that I safely could. He is Arthur's son. He convinced me of that, not only by what he said but by the testimony of his person. Every now and then, in a grotesque, vulgar way, he brought Arthur back to me. His mother,

whom you will remember as Dulcie Wynne, is dead ; but it appears that before her death she told him who his father was. Now, if I were actually the man's father, I couldn't very well denounce him."

"I don't see why not," interjected my uncle.

"Well, at any rate, he thought I should be ashamed to do so, and I daresay I should. But is there, do you think, at this time of day anything to debar me from letting the truth about that affair be known ? "

"Absolutely nothing !" cried Uncle Charles. "If ever a man was entitled to speak out, you are. I'll go farther and say that you're bound to speak out. For one thing, you'll have that young rascal sponging upon you for the rest of your days if you don't."

"He never has," I remarked.

"He won't think it's too late to mend, I suspect. Moreover, there's your duty to Humberston."

"And Elsie. That's my excuse, of course. But making the truth known isn't always the same thing as establishing it ; so will you bear witness for me ? "

"With all the pleasure in life. Well, Peter, if nothing else comes of this, at least it will be a joy to me to have made some atonement at last for my share in what I've always looked back upon as a dirty, shabby transaction."

"It doesn't signify now," said I.

At that consolation or pang—it is a little of both, but more of the former than of the latter, I think—

everybody who lives long enough must needs arrive. One recalls the bitterness and sweetness of the lost years and is, upon the whole, thankful that they can only be recalled in imagination. I suppose it was not unnatural that I should have thought rather sadly at that moment of dead people who would never know what I should have been glad to let them know ; but they had passed away, all of them, and the world in which they had lived had passed away also, and in fine, when things don't signify, they don't signify.

Uncle Charles recalled me to the present by observing that he grasped my dilemma. "For you and me to go to Sir John with what sounds uncommonly like a trumped-up yarn and ask him to believe it upon the strength of our bare assertion would be asking a good deal, wouldn't it ? But I'm glad to tell you that we can do better than that. You won't have forgotten that, while I was arranging matters with Miss Dulcie Wynne all those years ago, I was shown a photograph of Arthur and allowed to take possession of it. She told me I could do what I liked with the thing, and you know what I did with it. It was inscribed—as you may have noticed, though I daresay you didn't—' For Dulcie, from her ever devoted P. V.' His having substituted a P for an A will be helpful to us, as bearing out our statement that he represented himself to the lady under false colours, and Sir John should be able to recognise Arthur's handwriting. There's a little of her own

added to it. ‘ Returned by one who has no further use for portraits of Mr. Vaux. D. W.’ Lucky I never burnt that photograph ! ’

Uncle Charles went to his writing-table, unlocked a drawer and, after some search, found what he wanted.

“ There you are ! ” said he, tossing it over to me.
“ That ought to carry conviction—what ? ”

It could hardly fail to do so, nor did the failure of my sole aim and object now look probable ; yet, with the warrant of victory in my hand, I could not repress an uneasy qualm.

“ This is horribly like treachery to the departed,” I muttered.

“ Now, Peter,” said Uncle Charles resolutely, “ listen to me for a minute, if you’ll be so kind. You’ve always had high-flown, quixotic notions which I can’t pretend to share ; but I take leave, all the same, to call myself a gentleman and an honest man. If I’ve once had a doubt about that, you know when and why it was. Now, as a gentleman and an honest man, I tell you that if you don’t acquaint Sir John Humberston with the facts, I must. You’re unwilling to cast a slur upon Arthur’s memory ? But only two people—well, I’ll throw you in the son for a third, if you like—will be told what he did, and it isn’t a subject that they’ll care to talk about. As for you, surely it’s your business to consider the living rather than the dead. You say your business is to save the girl from Lacy.”

"Yes," I assented, "you are quite right. I can't like it, but I've obviously got to do it. In fact, I'm here to ask you to help me through with it. It would be impossible for Elsie to marry Arthur's son, I suppose."

"Oh, I don't say it would be impossible. Fathers and sons have married sisters before now; though I've always thought it rather unpleasant of them. What does seem to me practically impossible is that Sir John should give his consent to this particular marriage, and, as Lacy isn't in pursuit of a portionless bride, I should say it was longish odds against the marriage taking place without Sir John's consent."

"Well, then," said I, "when will you come to Grosvenor Place with me?"

"No time like the present," answered Uncle Charles briskly. "I should think we might count upon finding Humberston at home before luncheon, and at that rate I may catch my afternoon train all right."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE DEFEAT OF THE ALLIED FORCES

IT is reasonable to assume that an old gentleman who has had several attacks of bronchitis will not leave his comfortable house on a cold, raw morning ; but to act upon reasonable assumption is to invite the abnormal, and, sure enough, when Uncle Charles and I reached Grosvenor Place, we were told that Sir John had just gone out. The butler could not say whether his master would be back for luncheon or not ; but, being accustomed to admit me as a visitor to Elsie, he volunteered the information that Miss Humberston was at home.

"I think," said I, after an interrogative glance at Uncle Charles, "we'll go in and see her."

I spoke upon the impulse of the moment, feeling that I must utilise my uncle before he left London and with some idea that our announcement might almost as well be made to Elsie as to her father. Perhaps, if I had had more time for reflection, I might have decided differently ; but Uncle Charles acquiesced without hesitation, and while we were crossing the hall, the butler remarked :

"Mr. Lacy is in the library with Miss Humberston, sir."

"*Raison de plus!*!" murmured Uncle Charles.

Was it? I had my misgivings. However, it was too late to draw back, and that Lacy should be in the house at that unconventional hour was not without significance. There was just a chance that our irruption might arrest him in the very act of attempting to steal an irrevocable march upon me. I strongly believe that the butler had some such notion; for I detected a twinkle in his old eye as he opened the library door for us, and servants know everything, and probably he did not wish his young mistress to contract an alliance with a play-actor.

Lacy, looking a little flushed and excited, was standing up, with his back to the fire; Elsie, seated in an armchair hard by, her chin supported by her hand, did not rise until we were close to her. When she did, it was to greet us with ominous formality.

"How do you do, General Vaux?" said she. Then she held out her hand to me, saying, "How do you do?" And she did not call me "Mr. Peter."

"The fat," thought I to myself, "is in the fire."

There was no question about that. Lacy, between whom and me no salutations had been exchanged, flung down his gauntlet before I could speak.

"Unless I am much mistaken," he began, "you have come here to make a certain statement about me to Miss Humberston. Well, sir, I have been beforehand with you. All things considered, I

thought I had better be beforehand with you. After you ran away from me so unceremoniously last night, I guessed that, after all, you would probably risk this move, and I saw that, however painful it might be to me to divulge what I would rather have kept to myself, I had no alternative. You won't tell Miss Humberston anything that she doesn't know."

"I think we shall," I mildly replied; "although of course I can only conjecture how much you may have told her."

"I have told Miss Humberston—everything," Lacy proclaimed. "I have told her, amongst other things, that I have the dishonour to be your son."

I suppose he couldn't help inflating his chest and folding his arms upon it. I suppose the poor devil really did think that I was an unconscionable old rascal and that I deserved to be put to confusion. He was posing for the benefit of Elsie, who, however, was not looking at him. She had resumed her former attitude, with her chin on her hand, and had banished all expression from her features.

"Yes," said I; "but one of the statements which we have to make to Miss Humberston is precisely that you are not my son."

He laughed and, plucking a handful of papers out of his breast-pocket, flourished them in my face. "I was wondering whether you would try repudiation," he remarked. "Hardly worth while, is it?"

You said something last night about wanting proofs. Here they are ; you're welcome to examine them."

I answered that I would not trouble him, and then—feeling rather ashamed of myself, for I could not repress the conviction that Elsie, despite her unmoved countenance, was feeling rather ashamed of me—I gave a stammering account of the deception which had been practised by me and others in years gone by. I still stammer when my emotions are stirred, and it is quite probable that I did not look or sound very much like the witness of truth.

"I don't," observed Lacy, when I had finished, "believe one solitary word of all this."

Uncle Charles now interposed with : "Let me confirm what my nephew has just said. I am in a position to do so, because I'm sorry to tell you that I was concerned in the plot. Not willingly ; but perhaps you might think excusably, if you realised what the circumstances were. Peter hasn't mentioned that, after he had agreed to be Arthur's scapegoat, I was sent up to London as an envoy to interview the Lintern family and come to terms with them. My poor brother wasn't the man for such an errand, and I was glad to offer my services. Now I hadn't been talking long to Miss Lintern before she showed me a photograph which was signed 'P. V.', but which ought to have been signed 'A. V.' and was indeed a speaking likeness of my nephew Arthur. Thinking that this might be useful for future reference, I asked her to let me have it,

which she was kind enough to do, and, as you will see, she scribbled a few words upon the back of it before handing it over."

Uncle Charles got up and delivered the photograph to Elsie, whom he had been addressing all along, and who, after examining it in silence for a minute, observed :

" So that gave away the whole show."

" Naturally it did," assented my uncle, " and I daresay you wonder what I meant by not telling her then and there that Arthur had imposed upon her. That would have been the square thing to do, no doubt ; but you must remember that I was there primarily to conclude a bargain and that I didn't know much about the people with whom I had to deal. If I had let them know that Arthur was the culprit and that he was my brother's eldest son, they would have raised their price to a certainty. I thought of that and—well, I can't deny that I thought of other things too. Arthur was engaged to be married to your sister at the time, and for such a story to come out—as it probably would have done —might have been awkward, you see."

" I quite see," said Elsie.

" So the long and the short of it was that I went back to Chivenham without having let the cat out of the bag. I didn't, if you'll believe me, mean to allow an innocent man to suffer ; only, as far as I can remember, what I had in my mind was that there would be no necessity to enlighten the

Linterns, who would get all they had asked for. Moreover, it seemed to me that, before speaking to my brother, I had better see Peter ; for I couldn't make head or tail of his conduct. There he was, under sentence of banishment to Australia on account of this affair and proposing to pay five thousand pounds hush-money out of his own badly-lined pocket——”

“ Arthur repaid me the five thousand,” I put in.

“ That has nothing to do with it. There he was, I say, accepting the whole obloquy and cost for no imaginable reason, except a good-natured wish to screen his brother.”

“ And to enable his brother to make a lucrative marriage, perhaps,” observed Elsie a little unkindly.

“ Well, if you like to put it in that way. But how was he going to benefit by his brother's marriage ? No ; if he talked me over, it wasn't by pleading the cause of the family exchequer.”

“ He did talk you over, then ? ” asked Elsie, with some faint interest.

“ Otherwise the family history would have been different, I presume. Yes, Miss Humberston, he talked me over, and I ought never to have let him do it. All I can say is that he was very much in earnest and that he honestly cared more for other people's happiness—in particular for the happiness of one person, who wasn't Arthur—than he did for his own. And he was queerly persuasive. When a fellow speaks as he did to me, it rather confuses one's

everyday notions of right and wrong. Well, these things took place before you were born, and the savour has gone out of them, and I daresay it wouldn't be easy to make them seem real or important to you. Still I'll have a try. Peter, am I at liberty to tell Miss Humberston all you told me as we walked away from the station that evening ? "

" Oh no," I answered hastily ; " it was a confidential conversation, and it really has no sort of bearing upon the matter that we came here to clear up."

" I only wanted to clear up my own character," pleaded Uncle Charles.

" But why should you trouble to do that, General Vaux ? " asked Elsie. " Everybody seems to have behaved rather badly ; but it doesn't make very much difference now, does it ? I thought what you came here for was to prove who Mr. Lacy's father was, and I suppose the photograph is sufficient proof. Is there anything more to be said ? "

Lacy, who had been fidgeting about during Uncle Charles's harangue and had made repeated attempts to catch his eye, now struck in with :

" Whether this story is true or false I don't care a straw. If my father is dead, so much the better ! I have never made any claim upon him and never intended to make any. My position is not affected in the smallest degree."

" There is just this to be said," observed my uncle, ignoring him and answering Elsie, " that if

Peter had been what he was represented as being, he might have felt some delicacy about giving certain information to your father. Anyhow, it may have been thought that he would hesitate. As it is, he needn't."

"He can give his information here and now, if he likes," called out Lacy.

"I was not speaking to you," said my uncle curtly ; "I was speaking to Miss Humberston."

But, as Miss Humberston had apparently no rejoinder to offer, Lacy continued :

"I thought you understood that I myself have already made the disclosure with which you threaten me. Your suggestion, I take it, is that I ought to be cut by all decent people because I once did a thing for which I might have been sent to prison ; but Miss Humberston, I am glad to say, takes a more merciful view. I won't make excuses for myself to you ; you wouldn't pay any attention to them if I did, seeing that your only object is to injure me, not to protect Sir John Humberston or anybody else, and unfortunately you are entitled to call me a thief. I succumbed to what happened to be a very strong temptation and I must take the consequences. That sounds like justice ; still I wonder whether it's quite just that a man who has committed a single offence in his youth, who has been severely punished for it and who has kept straight ever since should be treated as a pariah for the rest of his life."

"I don't think it is," said Elsie.

"Have you kept straight ever since?" Uncle Charles blandly inquired.

"Yes, sir," Lacy returned, with a fierce frown, "I have; and I defy you to prove the contrary."

My uncle did not take up the challenge; though, judging by the expression of his face, he might have felt disposed to do so, had it not been for the restraining presence of a lady. The lady, for her part, broke an interval of silence by repeating:

"Really, General Vaux, I can't see that there is anything more to be said."

After that, what could General Vaux do but rise? And what could his chapfallen nephew do but imitate him? We had shot our bolt and missed our mark; it only remained for us to quit the field. Of course—as I made rueful inward acknowledgment—we should never have entered it. To warn Sir John Humberston that he was admitting into his family a man of more than dubious record would have been permissible and might well have proved effective; but to spring a similar allegation upon his daughter, accompanying it with a long narrative which could only seem to her as irrelevant as she had pronounced it, was an enterprise foredoomed to defeat its own end. Even if she had had no pre-disposition in Lacy's favour, she could scarcely have helped ranging herself on his side. The fault had been mine for acting in a hurry, and mine, it appeared, was to be the merited rebuke. Elsie was quite civil, if a trifle cold, in taking leave of my

uncle ; but she had no sort of civility for me. So undisguised, indeed, was her displeasure that for a moment I thought she was not going to say good-bye to me at all. However, she took my outstretched hand, and our eyes met. Well, when all was said and done, we had been friends, and I was an old man, and, since she was already so angry, the risk of making her angrier was scarcely formidable. I decided to chance it, and while I still held her hand, I whispered fervently :

“ *Don’t!* ”

Futile ? Well, yes, of course it was futile ; yet I confess that I had not expected that agitated monosyllable to provoke her to mirth, and such was its disconcerting effect. She laughed suddenly—not angrily, but as though moved by genuine, irrepressible amusement—then replied, in a voice as subdued as mine :

“ Thanks so much ! I really do understand my own business, though.”

With all my heart I hoped that she did, and with all my intelligence I was sure that she didn’t. I retired in my uncle’s wake, while Lacy, triumphant upon the hearthrug, with folded arms (why *would* he fold his arms in that fatuous way !) refused us so much as the compliment of a valedictory bow.

“ And now,” asked Uncle Charles, as soon as we were out of the house, “ when do we tackle Sir John ? ”

“ We don’t tackle him at all,” I answered

dejectedly ; "what would be the use ? Anything that we could tell him he is bound to be told by Elsie or Lacy or both of them. You heard what Lacy said ; he isn't at all afraid of being denounced now."

"He told a plausible tale," Uncle Charles admitted ; "only it won't really hold water, you know. Granting that the sins of the past must be forgiven some time or other, he's none the less a vulgar, dissolute miscreant. Humberston can't want his daughter to marry a fellow like that."

"I don't suppose he will," said I ; "but it may not be a question of what he wants."

"Arthur's illegitimate son too ! "

"Yes, I know. That in itself might be a sufficient reason for sending him to the right-about, and perhaps, if Sir John were ten years younger, to the right-about Mr. Lacy would be sent. As matters stand, the casting vote is not unlikely to rest with Lady Humberston, who is more than likely to give it the wrong way. Lady Humberston, who enjoys doing things that nobody else would do, doesn't see that the man is personally offensive, and, as you say, he knows how to give himself an air of plausibility. As for Elsie, I'm afraid her mind is made up."

Uncle Charles shrugged his shoulders. "Ah, well !—what did I tell you ? There's nothing to be done with an infatuated woman. I'm sorry for her ; she'll come to her senses when it's too late, and then she'll start shouting for a separation, as

they always do. I believe you're right, though ; I believe she'd side with the man if it could be proved that he had robbed a church and burnt his grandmother alive. Any ordinary human being would have been a little shocked and indignant at hearing how you had been treated ; but she simply didn't care a row of pins."

"I don't think she did," I agreed. "To be sure, it all happened a long time ago, as the Spanish priest said to comfort his flock, after he had moved them to tears by a too realistic sermon on Good Friday."

Uncle Charles laughed. "Miss Humberston wasn't moved and didn't need comforting, anyhow. Well, she may go to the devil for me. Now, Peter, you mustn't take this silly business too much to heart. You've done your best, and no man can do more. You're always doing your best, and generally you get kicked for your pains. Such is the way of the world."

"The world," I remarked, "feels instinctively that nobody so well deserves kicking as a man whose best is always another word for ineptitude."

"Rubbish ! I can't have you going home and brooding over this and making yourself miserable, when you've nothing on earth to reproach yourself with. Don't do that ; come on with me instead and have a couple of days' shooting. That'll do you no end of good, and we shall be only too glad of another gun."

But I had to decline the kindly-meant invitation. Whether I had much to reproach myself with or not —of course I had something—it would certainly be out of my power to help brooding over our defeat, and, as it would in all probability be also out of my power to help shooting atrociously, my Whitehall fireside seemed to be the fittest place for me.

CHAPTER XXV

TEA AND MUFFINS

I LUNCHED at the club in lonely heaviness of spirit ; after which I wandered back to my flat and tried, without any success, to read a book. I told myself that what had happened was only what would have happened in any event and that my personal bungling, although it might have cost me a friend whom I could ill bear to lose, had no more injured her than adroitness on my part could have benefited her ; but such reflections were not of a nature to bring me much solace. Everything had gone disastrously wrong, and if I could not have helped that, I had assuredly done what Uncle Charles was so kind as to call my best to accelerate disaster. It is futile to grumble at luck ; some people even go the length of maintaining, in the face of daily evidence to the contrary, that there is no such thing. Perhaps I may, without undue arrogance, boast that I have not grumbled very much ; yet I must say that my luck has not been good. What I have wanted in this world I have not had, while such intrinsically desirable things as I have not coveted have been with monotonous persistence allotted to me.

Amongst minor things—pleasant in themselves—which I particularly did not want that afternoon was a visit from my nephew Ralph ; so it was quite in harmony with the customary discord that he should presently march into the room. His speaking countenance proclaimed his errand, and mine, no doubt, was as silently articulate ; for he had hardly taken a chair before he began :

“ You haven’t done any good, I’m afraid.”

“ I’m afraid not,” I was fain to reply. “ Perhaps it wasn’t possible to do any good. Why Elsie hasn’t fallen in love with you is a puzzle to me. It would have been an easy and natural and altogether happy thing to do ; but——”

“ Oh, I wasn’t thinking of that,” he interrupted ; “ that’s all over and done with. I told you the other day that I knew I wasn’t in it and never should be. The only thing I hoped for was that you might manage to save her from that unspeakable bounder.”

“ There is no ascertained method,” I observed, “ of preventing young women from falling in love with unspeakable bounders.”

“ I never said there was,” returned Ralph, drawing his brows together. “ Of course if she’s in love with him, it’s all up. She *is* in love with him, then ? ”

“ Well,” I answered, cravenly endeavouring to stave off the bad moment of confession which I saw before me, “ I can’t tell you for certain that she is. She didn’t say she was.”

" You haven't much doubt about it, though."

" I haven't any doubt as to her liking the man," I reluctantly owned, " and I daresay she admires him too. Admirable he may be on the stage, for anything I know. In private life he leaves something to be desired ; still—"

" Uncle Peter," broke in Ralph impatiently, " I wish you wouldn't mind saying straight out what you think."

" I think—oh dear, this is very disagreeable ! " I sighed. " However, it has got to be gone through. I think, my dear Ralph, that I've been playing the fool. All I can plead in extenuation is that, from the point of view of ultimate results, a wise man might have fared no better."

My recital of what I had heard from General Aldenham, of my nocturnal interview with Lacy, of the latter's dramatic revelation and of my expedition to Grosvenor Place with Uncle Charles drew several low whistles and other manifestations of subdued surprise from Ralph, who ended by exclaiming :

" But all this sounds as if you had him in the hollow of your hand ! Hang it !—a fellow who has been expelled from Sandhurst for theft, not to mention his being an illegitimate son of Uncle Arthur's ! "

" It sounds," I agreed, " as if I had had nothing to do but to state those two facts ; but he was shrewd enough to forestall me with one of them, and a

delinquent who pleads guilty before a generous-minded tribunal hasn't much to fear from informers. As for the other, he had every right to believe that he was my son—which probably didn't prejudice the tribunal in my favour."

"But you say that you and Uncle Charles disproved that."

"We did ; and we were given to understand that our historical reminiscences were not to the point. Nor were they, except in so far as Elsie might consider that they were. What her answer amounted to was, ' You came here to cast aspersions upon my friend's character, and you might have spared yourselves the trouble, because I don't think any the worse of him on account of an old offence, of which he has repented. Whether he is your son or somebody else's son has nothing to do with it.' Now perhaps you see what I mean by saying that I played the fool. That I played into Lacy's hand is only too obvious. Instead of stupidly trying to scare him off, I ought, of course, to have taken no notice of him and gone straight to Sir John. Nevertheless, it must ultimately have come to be a question for Elsie's decision."

Ralph nodded gloomily. "Yes, as I said before, if she loves him, it's all up. Unless by any means she can be rescued from herself."

"There's just a chance," I observed, "of Sir John's putting his foot down. There's just a chance of his refusing supplies and of Lacy's sheering

off. But it's a poor chance, and I can't advise you to build upon it. Honestly, Ralph, I believe the best advice I can give you is to think no more about her."

" You might as well advise a man with a broken leg not to think about it and to run a hundred yards," returned Ralph, with a dolorous smile. " No, Uncle Peter, I can't stop thinking about her, and what's worse is that, by your account, I can't help her."

Really I did not see how he could, nor how I could either ; but I knew very well how he felt. It seemed as if history were repeating itself ; for when Vi had accepted Arthur in days long past, I had not been ignorant of the fact that she was compromising her chances of happiness, and I had thought, as Ralph was now thinking, that I should not mind about myself if I could believe that a bright future awaited one whom I loved more than I did myself. That may have been nonsense. Perhaps it is not in human nature to value somebody else's happiness as much as, or more than, one's own, and of course self-deception is the most ordinary of human failings. Nevertheless, there are exceptional humans. If I had continued faithful at heart to one love all my days, why should not my nephew, who in some ways regrettably resembled me, follow suit ? Therefore I could not take comfort from the commonplace *dictum* that sentimental sorrows pass. Almost always they do ; yet not always. Witness my

sentimental, sad and silly self at an age when one should know better than to be any of those things.

Half an hour or more after Ralph had left me, I heard the door-bell ring and wanted to tell my man that I was not at home ; but there are difficulties in the way of conveying such intimations in a small flat with a glazed front-door ; besides which, my own company was not at the moment as acceptable to me as it usually is. So I only sighed and prepared to offer a moderately cheerful visage to the intruder.

What I did offer her was an astounded one ; for out of all the world Elsie was the very last person whom I could have expected to see. She made a leisurely and smiling entrance, as though nothing had occurred to disturb our normal relations, and, having divested herself of her furs, sat down in the chair which Ralph had recently vacated.

“ Any tea to be had on the premises ? ” she inquired.

I gave the requisite order, and she called my servant back to say that she wanted China tea and would like muffins, but could do with scones. Then, in response to the notes of interrogation with which my person doubtless bristled, she informed me that she had just looked in to see how I was getting on “ after the invigorating breeze of the morning.”

“ Elsie,” said I, “ you may think this funny, but it doesn’t amuse me. You appear to bear no malice, and for that, so far as it goes, I am thankful.

I am afraid you don't bring me any better cause for thankfulness, though."

"Depends upon what you want," was her rejoinder.

"What I want," I told her, "is, as you well know, to hear that you are not going to make a fatal mistake."

"At that rate," she briskly declared, "all's well; for I don't propose to make any mistake. I don't, if you'll forgive me for saying so, make mistakes in quite such a lavish style as some people whom I could name."

I said: "Let us have it out and be done with it, please. Are you going to marry Lacy or not?"

"Why, of course not," she answered. "How you could ever have imagined! . . . But you do imagine such extraordinary and unflattering things!"

"Oh," I ejaculated, "what a weight you take off my mind!"

"Your mind, Mr. Peter," said Elsie, "is almost as large as your heart—which makes a big thing of it—but it doesn't seem capable of allowing the average share of discernment to mine. Now I am quite capable of making allowances for Mr. Lacy; because I know what he is, whereas he himself can't be expected to know what he is like."

"I thought you considered him so talented and interesting."

"I consider him out-of-the-way talented as an

actor and he interested me a little as a man. Only he is so very far from being a gentleman and his motive for honouring me with his attentions was so very thinly veiled that even I, dull and vulgar as you evidently think me, could hardly arrive at being dazzled by him."

I begged pardon with all humility and ventured to inquire why, under the circumstances, she had behaved as she had done that morning.

"I was wondering," she answered, "whether I would be very magnanimous and beg pardon for my behaviour in return; but really I don't think I will. It was so indicated! When you bounced in upon us in that ill-timed way, Mr. Lacy was just working up to the proposal which he resumed as soon as we had got rid of you. I couldn't have treated you otherwise than as a parenthesis. Even if you had been important—which you weren't, because what you had to say didn't in the least affect what I meant to say—I should still have felt that a gentle set-down was your due. And, after all, I wasn't rude."

"You were very rude indeed," said I.

She laughed a little. "Was I? Perhaps I didn't want General Vaux and Mr. Lacy to see how near I was to crying about things that didn't concern me."

Getting up hastily, she laid her two hands on my shoulders, and I saw that her eyes had filled on a sudden with tears. "Oh, poor old thing!" she

murmured ; “ poor dear old thing ! And I suppose you would never have told anybody ? ”

“ Why should I ? ” I asked. “ I was obliged to tell Lacy that he was not my son ; but, except for that, my past, as you truly remark, concerns nobody who is living to-day.”

“ Ah,” she returned, keeping her hands on my shoulders and shaking me gently to and fro, “ that’s your nasty, sinful pride, which has played the mischief with you from your youth up and which almost makes one feel that you deserve some of the rough usage that you have had. How dare you pretend that nobody is concerned with you to-day ! What of me, who am as good as your daughter ? — or would be, if you would let me.”

She dropped on her knees beside me, whispering : “ Won’t you tell me the whole story ? I haven’t heard the whole of it, you know.”

Assuredly she needed no information upon the subject after Uncle Charles’s indiscretions ; still, since she asked me, I told her divers things, and she said many kind ones, bringing back my long-lost youth to me by her comments in the strangest way. Again and again it might have been Vi who was speaking. . . . But I am not going to record what passed between us, because it was quite private and for the most part of interest only to ourselves. The happy part of it was that it led us to a complete mutual understanding ; so that at last I saw no reason why I should not frankly avow what my hopes

had been respecting Ralph; and although this brought about a perceptible change of countenance on my companion's part, I was glad to notice that it neither surprised nor offended her. She remarked indulgently that my having taken such a notion into my head was natural enough, but that these pretty little plans could not be made to come off merely because they were pretty little plans. The views of the humble and insignificant principals had to be taken into account.

I said I could answer for the views of one of them ; whereupon she rejoined :

“ Can you ? Well, the views of the other, I'm afraid, must remain uncristallised. I won't say that they are finally and decisively adverse, because I should so hate at this particular moment to say anything that you wouldn't like ; but I can't call them altogether favourable. You may remember that your nephew hasn't been at all nice to me. In the first place, it was pretty cool of him to tell me that a friend of mine was a cad——”

“ But Lacy isn't a friend of yours,” I interjected.

“ I beg your pardon ; he was then. If he isn't now, that's no fault of mine ; that's only because he saw fit to go raging out of the house in a whirlwind of violent language. I was going to say that, in the second place, your nephew might have shown better taste and better manners than he did by quarrelling with me when I ventured to request him not to take such liberties again.”

"He might," I agreed, "and he owes you an apology. When may he call upon you and make it? To-morrow?"

"Oh, not to-morrow," she answered, "nor the next day—nor for another week, I think. There's no such desperate hurry, is there? I don't know when he would be likely to find me at home if he did call. Besides, I really don't care enough about the matter to insist upon apologies."

"And you who have just protested your inability to say anything that I shouldn't like!"

She laughed. "Suppose," said she, "we dismiss contentious topics. Think of something else to talk about while I finish my tea."

What subject of conversational interest I discovered I do not remember; nor did it signify, for her interest and attention visibly wandered. While she was occupied with her tea and her muffins, I begged her to excuse me for a minute, and, on my return, she asked rather suspiciously what I had been about.

"Oh, nothing," I replied; "I was only talking to a man on the telephone. Do you think, upon the whole, that that invention is a blessing or a scourge to humanity?"

"Well, of course it may be either; so much depends upon who is at the other end of the wire. Were you talking to an agreeable or a disagreeable person?"

"He wasn't disagreeable," I answered. "I

wanted him to do something for me, and he said he would, that was all. Never mind about him ; tell me about Lacy's tempestuous exit."

I gathered from what she told me that Lacy had fully justified Ralph's description of him. He appeared to have lost his temper completely, to have declared that he had been humbugged of set purpose and to have given expression to his resentment in terms which no gentleman could have employed. However, we had agreed that he was not a gentleman, and, feeling that I could afford to show some generosity to a discomfited adversary, I reminded Elsie of her acknowledgment that allowances must be made for him.

"When all's said and done," I remarked, "you did lead him on."

She denied with much indignation that she had done any such thing. "I was just ordinarily civil to him, and I may have been a little extra civil when you and other people went out of your way to snub him ; but never did I give him the shadow of an excuse for imagining what he swore that he had been made to understand. How like you to begin taking his part now ! You'll be reproaching yourself for having been too hard upon him next."

"I can't altogether forget that he is my brother's son," I confessed.

Elsie threw up her hands with a gesture of mock despair. "I thought as much ! That's you all over ! I did hope that I should never have to speak

to Mr. Lacy again ; but of course I shall. You'll ask him to stay at Chivenham, and the more abhorrent he is to you the more you'll feel it a duty to shower benefits upon him. Very soon we shall hear that a theatre, financed by you, is going to be started under his management."

That is not likely to happen ; but I encouraged Elsie to further predictions and remonstrances because my object was to detain her with me as long as I could, and, by dint of wily strategy, I succeeded in doing so until the wished-for tinkle of the door-bell fell upon my expectant ear. Up I jumped, and met Ralph on the threshold.

"Is she still here ?" he asked breathlessly.

"She is," I replied, "unless she has sprung out of the window or climbed up the chimney."

I then clutched my hat, ran downstairs and made for the club. I did not return until it was time to dress for dinner, when I found upon the table a note addressed to me in Elsie's handwriting.

"DEAR OLD MAN" (it began),

"We have something to tell you ; only, as you know it already, perhaps we needn't write it down. We want to say that we are awfully happy and awfully grateful to you ; because, if it hadn't been for you, there's no knowing whether either of us would ever have been happy again. Make up your mind that you're going to have a good deal of our inspiring company for the future ; but we don't

want to stay with you when Mr. Lacy is in the house, please."

The above document was signed "Ralph Vaux" and "Elsie Humberston," two signatures which I hope soon to witness in the register of Chivenham parish church. So if I have said that Fortune has not treated me too well through life, I must in common decency own that at this concluding hour she has made some amends.

THE END

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are pleased to announce Novels for the Spring of 1916 by the following
LEADING AUTHORS, particulars of which will be found in the ensuing pages

LUCAS MALET

ETHEL M. DELL

H. DE VERE STACPOOLE

FRANK DANBY

MAXWELL GRAY

MABEL BARNES-GRUNDY

W. E. NORRIS

MAY SINCLAIR

DOUGLAS SLADEN

MRS. BELLOC LOWNDES

CURTIS YORKE

MRS. DE VERE STACPOOLE

FRANKFORT MOORE

M. P. WILLCOCKS

DOROTHEA CONYERS

G. B. BURGIN

BERTA RUCK

EDGAR JEPSON

ISABEL CLARKE

New 6s. Novels

An Undressed Heroine

By MABEL BARNES-GRUNDY

Author of "Hilary on Her Own," "Candytuft—
I mean Veronica," etc.

The titles that Mrs. Barnes-Grundy chooses are original, but her readers are bound to admit that they are invariably justified in the stories that bear them. Her last novel, although issued just after the outbreak of war, so far from suffering from the depression that was generally noticeable in the circulation of books at the time, was acknowledged widely as a cheerful antidote to the prevailing gloom.

The Battle of Flowers

By Mrs. H. de VERE STACPOOLE

Author of "Monte Carlo," etc.

The plot of Mrs. de Vere Stacpoole's new book turns on the love of two women for a blind man. Beauty has given one of those women exceptional powers of attraction, the other, whilst possessing great power of mind and personality, is plain almost to repulsiveness. The blind man's recovery of his sight gives the author a fine opportunity for presenting a solution to a most interesting and difficult problem. The book is staged in London and on the Italian coast, and is filled with the brilliancy and smartness that distinguishes all Mrs. Stacpoole's writing.

New 6s. Novels.

The Wisdom of Damaris

By LUCAS MALET

Author of "Sir Richard Calmady," etc.

The above long novel, which is the fruit of many years of thought and work, will most probably prove to be the author's best and most important work of fiction.

The scene of the first portion of the novel is laid in Northern India, where Damaris Verity's father, a famous soldier of the Mutiny, occupies a distinguished command.

The scene afterwards changes to the neighbourhood of Marychurch, an ancient seaport town on the English south coast, where General Verity owns a small property. Here Damaris passes her girlhood, and learns much about men and things, not, perhaps, usually known by young ladies of her age. The novel should be interesting as indicating the social conditions which have gone far to produce in this country the Feminist movement of the present day.

The Eyes of the Blind

By M. P. WILLCOCKS

Author of "Change," "The Wings of Desire,"
"The Power Behind," etc.

The question asked of the prisoner in the Bastille in Dickens' "Tale of Two Cities" was: "Are you glad to be recalled to life?" Miss Willcocks' new novel has a similar subject, for it is the story of one who regained his eyesight after an operation with most disconcerting results. We are often told that it is folly to be wise if ignorance is bliss. In this novel we are asked whether, if blindness means happiness, one should therefore shrink from the light. It is a story more intense in its drama than her recent books, since, like "Wings of Desire," it deals mainly with West Country types, and, like "The Wingless Victory," it is a novel of temptation and of the love that conquered after a hard fight. Miss Willcocks has gone back to the old simple things that are as old as man and woman, though here, too, there is the interest of opposing social and religious atmospheres, and here again many of the "saints" are but whitened sepulchres.

New 6s. Novels.

The World-Mender

By MAXWELL GRAY

Author of "The Silence of Dean Maitland, etc.

"The World-Mender" is somewhat akin to the author's previous book, "The Great Refusal," and bids fair to be as successful. It is a long novel, and tells the history of a village boy's rise to be Cabinet Minister, his training, psychological development, and the gradual sloughing of his extreme Socialist and Radical principles as he rises. There is a strong love interest, and the charming scenes and characters of country life, which are a characteristic feature of this author's work, are not the least attractive features of this important novel.

Disentangled

By CURTIS YORKE

Author of "Her Measure," "The Girl in Grey," etc.

This is the story of a man who loved one woman, and, by a curious mistake, married another. How all seemed to go wrong for a time—how a young woman made mischief, and an old woman made peace—how many interesting things happened, and some sad things, and some amusing things—all are told in Curtis Yorke's well-known and peculiarly distinctive style. "Disentangled" contains, perhaps, some of the best work this popular author has yet given us, and will undoubtedly add to her already enormous circle of readers.

New 6s. Novels.

A FIRST EDITION OF 43,000 COPIES.

The Bars of Iron

By ETHEL M. DELL

Author of "The Way of an Eagle," etc.

This story will be very widely welcomed by the great novel-reading public, and especially by Miss Dell's large circle of admirers. In this new book she maintains that vivacious power which has so long held her readers spell-bound, and at the same time she has given us what is undoubtedly *the best novel that she has written*.

Piers Evesham, the heir to Sir Beverley Evesham, of Rodding Park, falls in love with Avery Denys, the Mother's-help at the Vicarage. He afterwards discovers that Avery is the widow of Eric Denys, the man whom he had killed, when he was but nineteen years of age, in a fatal brawl which occurred in Australia. Piers, the passionate lover, struggles with this secret knowledge, which nearly rends his very soul, and he refrains from fulfilling his promise to confess his crime. The battle with his imaginary fate is most ably conceived, and the scenes are depicted with vivid realism.

Avery Denys, the lovable Mother's-help, is presented to the reader with a power that will attract all. Aunt Avery, as she is called by the Vicar's children, protects them from the cruel treatment of their narrow-minded, severely strict father. Avery, who avoids Piers, and at first will not listen to his avowals of adoration, at last consents to become his wife. After their union she accidentally hears that it was Piers who caused the death of her first husband. This information instantly fills her with bitterness, and she insists that she and Piers shall part. The estrangement and final reconciliation are powerfully described, but the latter is not achieved until Piers has been to the Front and returned totally disabled.

New 6s. Novels

Proud Peter

By W. E. NORRIS

Author of "No New Thing," &c.

"Proud Peter" is the life story, related by himself, of a man who is led, partly by force of circumstances, but more by the trend of his character, into repeated acts of self-sacrifice. The second son of a west country gentleman, he is at first intended for holy orders, but has to disappoint his parents both in that respect and afterwards, more seriously, in others. The vicissitudes of a career which he allows a cloud to darken take him to Queensland, as a breeder of horses, to the precincts of the Divorce Court and to South Africa during the Boer War. It is some time since Mr. W. E. Norris attained a position in the first rank as a writer of charming fiction, but readers of the present book will admit that he continues to hold them by the magic of his pen.

The Hut by the River

By G. B. BURGIN

Author of "The Shutters of Silence," etc.

"The Hut by the River" hides a thrilling mystery, worked out with all Mr. Burgin's wonted skill, and deals with the unpremeditated but fatal revolver shot at her husband and his inamorata by the "leading lady" of a light opera company which reaches Plantagenet, a little township in Ontario. In her flight the "leading lady" is compelled to leave her child behind her, and that child becomes the innocent accomplice in the death of a licentious Seigneur, who persecutes her with his unwelcome attentions. "Old Man" Tucker and Peter van Loo alone are sufficient to hold the reader's attention ; and the suffering mother, with her noble self-sacrifice when she braves death to see her daughter again, is a convincing study of maternal love and devotion. The tragedy of the story is lightened by many touches of quiet humour and picturesque description.

New 6s. Novels

Twilight

By FRANK DANBY

Author of "The Heart of a Child," etc.

"Twilight" is in a vein that is entirely new for Frank Danby, but it proves the author's versatility, for it is a convincing story of absorbing interest. The principal character in the tale is an invalid woman who takes a country house which she soon discovers to be haunted. She finds that she possesses, probably owing to her ill health, a faculty which enables her to visualize a woman, Margaret by name, who was once a tenant of the house. This ghostly visitant was during her lifetime a writer with a passing vogue, and her object in haunting the place is actuated by the desire of having her life written. She induces the invalid to undertake this task, and some diaries, letters and notes reveal the story of the dead woman.

The book is full of minor incidents, and those clever character studies which contribute so much to the vitality and realism of Frank Danby's stories.

The Douglas Romance

By DOUGLAS SLADEN

Author of "His German Wife," "The Tragedy of the Pyramids," etc.

In this new novel Mr. Douglas Sladen deals with the vicissitudes of a beautiful girl of good family, who is left an orphan, and just before the war goes into musical-comedy, to make her living.

Much of the interest of the book lies in the transformation of the men who seek her hand, from rich and dissolute idlers, hanging round the green room, to gallant soldiers at the front.

The book contains some of the glowing and palpitating battle-scenes which have won Mr. Sladen so many readers in his earlier novels.

Like "His German Wife," Mr. Sladen's new novel, which this time has no foreign characters in it, is a dainty and vivacious love-story, full of human nature and humour, thrown into relief by occasional bursts of tragedy.

New 6s. Novels.

The Rise of Raymond

By F. FRANKFORT MOORE

Author of "I Forbid the Banns," etc.

This is the story of a young man who, while having unbounded aspirations, is condemned to a commonplace career for several years, but who, after an arduous struggle, which is the means of developing all his best qualities, succeeds in emancipating himself, and getting within sight of the goal he has been seeking. Being strongly endowed with the temperament of a true artist, it is needless to say that his love-affairs keep pace with his advance in life, though his fidelity to his ideal suffers no change. The period in which the main part of the story takes place is during the early eighties of the last century, when Mr. Du Maurier was satirizing the new "aesthetic movement" in the pages of *Punch*, and George Grossmith was creating the part of Bunthorne in *Patience*.

The Night Hawk

By EDGAR JEPSON

Author of "The Lady Noggs," etc.

The story of a wealthy and amiable man about town who, in his disappointment at being rejected for the army, leads deliberately the life of the complete rotter that the rejection declares him to be. He turns night into day and in the society of a club of like-minded associates, plays the waster from sunset to the dewy dawn. Chance brings him into contact with a charming country girl lost in London. How this meeting leads to his complete reformation and how he soon finds himself wholly out of touch with the night-hawk life, must be left for the reader discover.

New 6s. Novels.

Tasker Jevons: The Real Story

By MAY SINCLAIR

Author of "The Three Sisters," "The Divine Fire," etc.

This is the story of a young man of genius. Probably no writer of the present day, save Miss Sinclair, would have attempted or could have accomplished the writing of this book. The man with his enthusiasm and his gift for compelling people to do his behests is wonderfully pourtrayed. Tasker Jevons is introduced as an undeveloped youth of unprepossessing features who emerges from the humble strata of a small provincial town. He arrives in London and makes his way easily to a foremost position as a writer, and marries a beautiful girl. When the War breaks out, Jevons, who is not generally embarrassed by modesty, fears that he is a coward, but proves himself anything but one.

Treasure: A Romance of the South Seas

By H. DE VERE STACPOOLE

Author of "The Blue Lagoon," "The Pearl Fishers," &c.

Mr. Stacpoole's new story opens at daybreak in Sydney where Houghton, the penniless wanderer, meets Macquart, the ragged, penniless ex-convict, with a fortune in his head. The streets of Sydney rise up before the reader, who hurries along, fascinated, in the company of Houghton, Bobby Tillman, Curlewis, Macquart, and the inscrutable Screed, on the business of fitting out a treasure-hunting expedition to search for the gold *cache* known to Macquart. The story of the search, of the finding of Agala, the girl with the corsets of brass, of the great thorn maze of New Guinea, and of how the gold literally seizes the villainous Macquart, make up a romance of love and adventure fresh and fascinating, and filled with the light of youth and morning.

New 6s. Novels.

Miss Million's Maid

By **BERTA RUCK**
(Mrs. Oliver Onions)

Author of "His Official Fiancée," &c.

A high-spirited young girl, beautiful and well-bred, but without a penny to her name, or a decently cut frock to her back, grows tired of belonging to the class of the "'Come-downs' who have neither the advantages of being rich or the fun of being poor." Defiantly she dons cap and apron in the service of Miss Million, a young heiress who began life as a little maid-of-all-work, and who has very little notion of how to spend her vast inherited fortune. Complications ensue, intertwined with the love stories of mistress and maid.

The Lamp of Destiny

By **ISABEL CLARKE**

Author of "Whose Name is Legion," &c.

Unlike Miss Clarke's former novels "The Lamp of Destiny" is not concerned except indirectly with any religious problem. It is the story of a little girl, one of the survivors of a shipwreck, who is adopted by an elderly couple unaware of her real parentage. The secret is known only to the young officer who saves her from the wreck. The history of the development of Irene from a little rebellious child into a beautiful tender woman capable of making the great sacrifice which circumstances demand is touchingly related.

New 6s. Novels.

The Scratch Pack

By DOROTHEA CONYERS

Author of "The Strayings of Sandy," etc.

The scene of Dorothea Conyers' new novel is laid on the south coast of Ireland, at the beginning of the war. Owing to the absence of the Master there is no one left to hunt the hounds, and foxes are doing damage; so crippled Darby Dillon, who can ride but do nothing else, gets together the farmers' foot-dogs and hunts them. Gheena Freyne, who starts the idea, is full of enthusiasm for the war and suspects a certain Basil Stafford, who has not gone to the Front, of being a German agent. She finally, having trouble at home, becomes engaged to Darby Dillon, who has loved her for years, but this does not end matters, and though Darby is left alone, it is with the hope of someone else who really cares for him. The foot-dogs kill many foxes and keep the hunt going for the winter.

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